Inspection of Stoke-on-Trent local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 12 to 23 May 2025

Lead inspector: John Roughton, His Majesty's Inspector

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

The chief executive and recently appointed corporate director of children's services have a shared understanding of the main challenges faced across the city in improving the lives of their most vulnerable children. Despite several changes in the senior leadership team since the last inspection in 2022, some incremental improvements have been made with respect to identified areas for improvement, for example in child protection planning and private fostering arrangements.

Quality assurance arrangements still do not ensure consistently strong oversight of social work with children and their families. Many referrals for children are not progressed quickly enough, and 16- and 17-year-old homeless children are not supported effectively in a timely way. Children in care experience positive support and their needs are identified and well met. Supervision and management oversight remain variable in some areas and are not making a sufficient impact on the swift progression of plans to improve children's circumstances. Participation opportunities for children and young people to shape service development and in improving the local offer are not fully developed. Education, training and employment (EET) outcomes for care-experienced young people are weak. The children and family's workforce are very positive about working for Stoke and have strong local connections and loyalty to the area. While leaders acknowledge and recognise these

areas for practice improvement, the pace of change to date has not been sufficient for vulnerable children.

What needs to improve?[1]

- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless. (Outcome Three, National Framework)
- Management oversight and supervision, to ensure the quality and consistency of children's plans being progressed. (Enabler Two, National Framework)
- The effectiveness of transition planning for older children in care and disabled young people leaving care. (Outcome Four, National Framework)
- The engagement and participation of care-experienced children and young people in strategic planning. (Enabler Two, National Framework)
- The local offer for care leavers, to enhance employment and training opportunities. (Outcome Four, National Framework)
- The quality and impact of the audit function on practice improvement and the level of quality assurance activity undertaken. (Enabler Two, National Framework)

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

1. Children and families in Stoke-on-Trent benefit from early help assessments that are completed promptly and collaboratively with families. Interventions to support families often start during the assessment, ensuring help is quickly provided. Family hubs provide an extensive range of accessible universal and targeted services to support families.

2. When referrals regarding concerns for children are deemed urgent, parents are promptly spoken to, and while parental consent is sought, it is not clearly recorded what has been consented to. However, for referrals which are assessed as less urgent, over half are not completed in a timely way, meaning that the identification and response to children's potential need are not happening soon enough for these children.

3. Most repeat referrals have not had appropriate interventions and responses for children and their families in line with their previous presenting risks and concerns. Closure records and assessments lacked contingency plans to prompt steps which should be taken if concerns for children re-emerge.

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

4. Once in progress, agency checks are promptly and thoroughly completed, providing a rounded insight into children's circumstances. Social workers' analyses and recommendations are well formulated and written, providing a clear rationale for the next steps.

5. Effective triaging of work and initial screening of referrals regarding children experiencing domestic abuse in their home leads to an appropriate response. Decisions are proportionate to children's needs. Previous contacts and responses are now considered to determine the level of support offered.

6. Most children and families receive comprehensive assessments of children's needs. Some assessments take too long to complete due to a lack of capacity in the assessment team. This means that children's needs are not identified and responded to at the earliest opportunity. In the pre-birth team, assessments help to build and sustain trusting relationships with vulnerable parents. This helps parents develop an understanding of their unborn baby's needs and engage with support.

7. Disabled children receive a highly effective and responsive service from social workers in line with their needs. However, disabled children are not always allocated an adult services worker in a timely way. This does not support well-planned and effective transitions for these children and their families.

8. Children receive an appropriate and proportionate response when risks to their well-being escalate. Strategy discussions are timely and mostly attended by relevant multi-agency professionals who share information to inform the analysis of risk. Minutes of strategy discussions clearly record the rationale for decision-making.

9. Child protection conferences are convened appropriately when a protection plan is needed to reduce risk and vulnerability for children. When children do not progress to child protection conferences, they receive the right levels of support to meet their needs and vulnerabilities.

10. Children's plans are concise. They focus on key changes required and are specific about the work required to achieve them. Child in need and core group meetings are held regularly to review children's plans. They are well attended, progress of work is closely evaluated, and new developments and changes are considered.

11. Children in need of help and protection are seen regularly and seen alone when appropriate. Interventions to support parents are provided from an appropriate range of sources, enabling some parents to start addressing previously abusive and neglectful parenting patterns.

12. Social workers recognise the adverse impact of domestic abuse on children, and services to help parents understand abusive relationships are promptly

provided. A skilled and confident specialist worker undertakes effective direct work with men where domestic abuse is a feature, to reduce risks to children. As a result, risks to children have decreased, so they can be safely stepped down from child protection and child in need plans.

13. Decisions to enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) are not always made in a timely manner, in particular, when there is a very recent history of previous children being placed in alternative care arrangements. This meant that children remained living in situations that did not promote their longer-term well-being.

14. Most letters before proceedings provide clear information for parents. There are timely reviews of PLO cases which monitor progress of families. The head of service and case progression officer, through extensive liaison with the local family judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), have reduced delays for children in proceedings.

15. The specialist exploitation team is skilled and determined in its efforts to reduce risks to children due to criminal exploitation. Children receive robust multi-agency scrutiny, oversight and intervention. There is a timely response to conducting return home interviews. The local authority designated officer service is effective in keeping children safe.

16. Children living in private fostering arrangements are visited and assessed within appropriate time frames. Assessments are comprehensive and inform effective plans.

17. The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless is ineffective. Not all children receive a joint housing and children's services assessment, and children are not routinely informed of their rights.

18. Young carers receive a comprehensive assessment, and their individual needs are clearly identified and appropriately addressed. The support provided is making a demonstrable difference to their well-being.

19. There are effective handover arrangements in place between day services and the emergency duty team. Most work completed by the emergency duty team with children and their families is timely, appropriate and well recorded.

20. Supervision and management oversight of staff take place regularly. However, the quality of this is variable, which does not always help social workers to critically assess and improve their practice.

21. Increasingly effective working with other teams supports the children missing education (CME) team to gather all information available. Records are suitably detailed and show the action taken. Staff in the CME team use the information in records to ensure that concerns for children are quickly shared and followed

up. The elective home education (EHE) lead is very aware of risk factors for EHE children dependent on their status and a personalised approach is taken to support and monitor these children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

22. When decisions are made to bring children into care, they are appropriate, and once children are brought into care, good decisions are made to work towards and achieve permanency for children. Most children in care are supported by committed and skilled social workers who visit them at a frequency that helps them to develop and sustain positive, stable and trusting relationships. Children living in long-term foster care thrive in these family environments. Many of these children also benefit from stability of social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs).

23. There are strong working relationships between children's guardians and IROs, which help to progress children's plans in a timely manner during proceedings. Where children require legal permanence, the quality of reports presented to the family court is variable.

24. When identified and assessed, kinship carers are supported to apply for special guardianship orders where this is in the best interests of the child. The timing and use of family group meetings are not consistent, and this sometimes leads to a delay in the consideration of kinship care arrangements for some children.

25. Permanency planning for children returning to live with their parents is strong. The work of the reunification team is a strength. Skilled, child-centred social work assistants within the team work closely with parents, children and the wider family network to support safe and appropriate reunification of children.

26. Care planning in the disabled children service is exceptionally thorough. Social workers are strong advocates for their children, ensuring they have the support in place to meet their needs and improve their experiences and outcomes. Disabled children's care plans are informed by multidisciplinary planning. Children's preferred ways of communicating are understood and acted on by social workers who know them well.

27. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive the right support, care and accommodation to ensure they are safeguarded, healthy, have pathways into education, and have their cultural needs met. Children's plans are comprehensive and bespoke, and social workers supporting them value and respect children's cultural heritage.

28. Children's reviews are held within timescales and are careful, child-centred explorations of children's progress. The views of most children are central to their reviews and evident in their day-to-day care. Family time is carefully

reviewed and managed to ensure that it is safe, suitable and in children's best interests.

29. Insufficient progress has been made since the last inspection to develop participation opportunities for children in care more widely and to influence and contribute to strategic decision-making.

30. Children's unique health needs are understood, and children receive the health services they require. A small number of children with a plan for adoption experience delay in their adoption medicals, impacting on the progress of their plans for permanence.

31. The quality of life-story work for most children is strong, meaning they understand their early experiences, both now and when they are older.

32. Children who go missing from care and those at risk of exploitation receive comprehensive support from specialist workers, who consider potential risk of exploitation and push-and-pull factors, reducing future episodes of going missing and reducing risk. Risk management meetings are held to analyse and coordinate effective responses, and in most cases help to reduce future episodes of going missing and associated risks.

33. Senior leaders have strong oversight of the plans for the very few children living in unregistered settings and there is regular review of progress, to ensure they are safeguarded effectively. Social worker visits are undertaken weekly, and this provides additional oversight and safeguards for children. The commissioning team is proactive in its ongoing searches for registered provision for children. This helps to ensure that children can move to registered provision that meets their needs at the earliest opportunity.

34. The virtual school is a strength. Effective systems and processes are now embedded. As a result, children make progress from their starting points on entry to care, academically, emotionally, socially and culturally. Children are well supported at all transition points in their lives.

35. General foster carer recruitment is gradually increasing the number of applications received and assessments are taking place. This is the result of a revised recruitment strategy to address the recent decline in general foster carer recruitment.

36. Adoption is considered when it is appropriate for children, and planning for permanence is timely. Adoption recruitment strategies in place are not fully effective and do not yet provide a sufficient number of adopters for children.

37. Leaders are continuing work to further develop placement sufficiency in the availability of homes for children across residential, fostering and adoption placements.

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

38. Care-experienced young people in Stoke-on-Trent are supported well by committed personal advisers (PAs) who, despite high caseloads, do their best to help them in their transitions to early adult life.

39. PAs visit and keep in touch with most young people, including those over 21, in line with their unique needs. More PAs have recently been recruited, which is gradually reducing caseloads.

40. PAs are not introduced to young people in a timely way. This means transition planning for many does not start soon enough. Positively, some young people are being helped to reconnect to people who are significant to them through a lifelong links service. Importantly, this enables them to build and strengthen their networks of support and friendships.

41. A skilled and committed participation worker is highly valued by young people and is beginning to raise the profile and scope of participation initiatives. A prominent example is a multi-agency hub, which young people have long requested and is due to open later this year. Corporate parenting young people 'champions' have recently been put in place and more opportunities are being developed for a wider cohort of young people to influence the development of services and resources.

42. Pathway plans capture the voice of young people and highlight their financial and other entitlements. Some plans are not aspirational and specific enough, leading to delay in achieving agreed goals.

43. Young people are registered with GPs, dentists and opticians and are well supported to help stay in sound physical health. PAs are creative in using their detailed local knowledge of community resources to help many young people secure help in relation to their mental health, though the impact and outcome of emotional health provision is not sufficiently understood to inform future commissioning.

44. The local offer for care leavers does not feature enough well-targeted support for young people. A lack of help with public transport, broadband and driving lesson costs limits their access to education, training and employment (EET) opportunities. Young people living outside Stoke do not have the same entitlement regarding council tax exemption. Senior leaders are looking to redress this and consultation activity with young people is under way in the revision of the offer.

45. Many young people are carefully prepared to manage independent living successfully. This is achieved through a blend of PA and supported accommodation inputs. A long-established House Project is a highly effective

and innovative resource, intensively preparing a small number of young people for independence. Most young people live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. However, a lack of sufficiency of supported accommodation, council and social housing tenancies is a barrier to some young people securing the type of accommodation that would meet their needs.

46. Care leavers who are seeking asylum receive financial support, help with accommodation and in accessing legal advice to support their asylum application and appeals if required.

47. Young people who are vulnerable to exploitation do not always receive a consistently robust response. Some delays in information-sharing hinder timely responses, and PA visiting and management oversight are not increased to support young people to reduce risks. This means PAs are not always aware of the young people's circumstances. When young people are detained in custody, they are not visited often enough, and their urgent needs are sometimes not promptly addressed. Pre-release planning with probation is strongly evident to support young people.

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

48. Senior leaders in Stoke-on-Trent mostly know themselves and their service well. Leaders are aware of most of the areas of the service and practice which continue to need further development. Political leaders are highly supportive of the children's services agenda. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services in response to increased demand is a continuing commitment.

49. Leaders have made effective use of their improvement partners and Department for Education adviser, leading to the ending of formal oversight in February 2025. A Local Government Association review of corporate parenting arrangements has led to a revised and refreshed corporate parenting board, gradually improving young people's participation and influence, although there is much more to do to extend participation opportunities for all children and young people.

50. Services for disabled children and the work of the virtual school are now both strengths in Stoke, as is the support offered to young carers. However, there are many areas of the service still in progress or in the early days of development. In particular, quality assurance arrangements are underdeveloped in ensuring consistently strong oversight of and improvement in practice. Leaders understand capacity issues in the care leavers service and the need to continue to closely monitor PA workloads to ensure they can respond appropriately to the fluctuating needs of young people.

51. When issues were brought to the attention of senior leaders during the inspection, they have been receptive to challenge and have reflected on and responded positively to feedback received. They have been quick to identify remedial actions where necessary, for example in mitigating risk during the early implementation of a new referral system in the integrated 'front door'.

52. The local authority is continuing work to further develop the number of homes available for children in residential, fostering and adoption placements. There are several initiatives in place focusing on in-house and external residential and fostering provision, as well as a review of the regional adoption agency (Together4Children) in progress. While the overall number of children in care is decreasing, the proportion placed in residential care is increasing. Leaders recognise the need for a comprehensive edge of care package to reduce reliance on residential placements.

53. The council has developed a strong development offer. Staff have readily available access to training that is appropriate and relevant to their areas of practice, including training in support of the local authority's chosen practice model. Recording practice is variable, with pockets of better practice emerging where records are written to children using language that cares.

54. The performance framework is currently being revised and strengthened. Managers now have access to a suite of reports providing live performance data to enable proactive performance management. New arrangements are about to be implemented to target specific areas of performance, but it is too soon to see any impact.

55. Quality assurance arrangements are not effective or consistently applied. Audit activity is not supporting improvement for children or identifying learning for the wider organisation and does not include feedback from children and families or any moderation to ensure greater consistency. A review of the quality assurance arrangements has been commissioned and is in progress.

56. Strengthening and stabilising the workforce is a priority for leaders in Stoke. There is a comprehensive workforce development strategy in place, effectively coordinated by the principal social worker. The social work academy supports and trains newly qualified staff and provides apprenticeship options that are helping to bring on more social workers from within the local authority. This is beginning to increase numbers of permanent staff.

57. Social workers are very positive about working for Stoke and have strong local connections and loyalty to the area. They describe a supportive and caring organisational culture evident across the workforce and workers feel respected and valued. Workers are almost universally positive about the support they receive from their managers and peers. While management oversight and supervision routinely take place, their quality in supporting practice improvement and helping to embed the local authority's practice model remains variable.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

This report is available at https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: http://eepurl.com/iTrDn.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted