

Report to the Minister of State for Children and Families on ways forward for children's services in Stoke on-Trent

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Executive Summary

This report covers a period of 4 months following an Ofsted inspection of children's services in February 2019, which judged children's services in Stoke on Trent to be inadequate. I was appointed as Commissioner in May to undertake the review. I have looked specifically at what went wrong, the steps taken by the Council to deal with the concerns, the impact this has had, and whether this has been sufficient to give confidence in the Council's capacity and capability to make improvements rapidly going forward, or whether alternative arrangements need to be considered.

The report covers the context in which children's services operate, including some of the demographic issues, the City Council's ambitions for children, the political history and current political and officer leadership. Stoke on Trent is an area of high deprivation with a high proportion of children living in poverty in some areas in the city. The Council have a number of strategic plans in place but those relating to children do not seem to have driven improvements in the support and care for the most vulnerable children in the city.

Lead politicians have all expressed a wish to address the issues in children's services and recognise that this is one of the highest priorities facing the Council. However political leadership in Stoke on Trent is complex and complicated. There have been many changes in administration in the past 20 years. The most recent change was this year. The May 2019 elections resulted in a Conservative / City Independent coalition with the Conservative group leader becoming Leader of the Council. The

financial pressures facing the Council are serious and lie at the centre of politicians' concerns. There is a danger that this emphasis may get in the way of the essential need for political drive to support the officer leadership in order to make the necessary improvements a reality.

Also, because of continued changes in the administration and the ongoing necessity for councillors from different parties to work together, it is imperative that there is full political support across parties for the plans relating to children's social care, to support future sustainability of improvements made.

Background information on how children's services have been organised over recent years is outlined to develop an understanding of why services have deteriorated so significantly. Key findings from reviews and Ofsted inspections are detailed, giving a picture of high demand for children's social care and staff having high workloads over a number of years. There has been a continuous rise in the number of children in care particularly since 2017, at a rate much higher than statistical neighbours, which has added to workload and financial pressures.

Service changes in Stoke on Trent have not been well implemented, leaving staff insufficiently supported to respond to and benefit from new initiatives, some of which were intended to improve their working environment. Examples include the introduction of the new case management system Liquid Logic and the use of Signs of Safety as the model of practice. Reviews undertaken by external consultants and most recently by Leeds Council, outline the impact of poor implementation on quality of practice.

Recommendations from Ofsted in 2015 and from a comprehensive review by independent consultants in 2016 were not followed up. Had they been this would likely have led to improvements in the support for social workers, and in the quality of practice. From 2017 onwards, the continued rise in numbers of children in care put pressure on all parts of the service and on the budget.

In 2018, during the year before the Ofsted inspection, there were many changes in senior and middle management posts in children's services which will have had an impact on continuity of leadership and ability to implement necessary change. Proposed major changes to the organisation and arrangements of children's social care were either not implemented, or progressed without proper planning.

The current picture is one of poor practice across the service. Issues that had been identified as early as 2015, including insufficient management oversight and supervision of cases were still a significant factor when Ofsted inspected this year, and are only now being addressed. Specially recruited assessment teams established in January did not reduce the pressures on the service as had been planned, and are now being disbanded through re-alignment proposals. There have been difficulties with how the MASH (front door) operates and this has been a priority area for improvement but progress has been slow.

There are a high proportion of social work staff with many years' service in Stoke-on-Trent and real loyalty and commitment to the area. However, many feel that high workloads and recent history of many changes in senior management have made the

situation difficult for them. The outcome of the Ofsted inspection was not a great surprise to many but was a big disappointment.

The financial position for the Council and for children services, in relation to both the base budget and the Dedicated Schools Grant, is very difficult. Improvements in assessments, care planning, and early intervention will begin to address this, but this will take time to implement and impact.

There have been many relatively recent changes in senior management, and both the DCS and AD are interim appointments. A recruitment process for a permanent DCS was started but has been paused pending the outcome of this review. The City Director has secured a Chief Executive role in another local authority and will be leaving Stoke-on-Trent. A recruitment process is underway to secure a new City Director and to minimise any transition period.

The corporate and political leadership of the Council understand the challenges facing the service and are fully committed to ensuring necessary improvements as quickly as possible. They have accepted that they are not able to do this on their own.

The scale of the challenge is such that experienced, rigorous and innovative leadership and direction will be needed to drive forward the necessary changes. Knowledge and expertise is needed at all levels in the service to focus on improving the quality of practise. It is likely that it will take a period of at least 2 years to bring about the degree of change needed in all aspects of service delivery. Stoke is just at the beginning of a comprehensive improvement programme, and will need to sustain the commitment and focus over this period of time and beyond, if improvements are to be embedded and sustained.

At this time, I believe the Council should retain responsibility for managing children services and should be given time with substantial help, to drive the improvements forward. I do not consider that they have the necessary capacity and expertise within the service, to undertake this effectively and quickly without support, but any alternative would not deliver improvements as quickly as they are needed.

During the period of the review I have considered with the DFE and with the Council options for securing such support. Essex Council were initially approached to undertake a short review and further discussions have now taken place to establish support over the next 3 months to focus on improving practice and performance. This will be part of a package which will include input from the regional improvement alliance as well as from Stockport, another Partner in Practice. The Council with my support is also looking to increase strategic leadership capacity over the next 3 months.

My recommendation is to agree this arrangement for the next 3 months during which options to secure longer term support, aimed at achieving sustainable improvement, are finalised.

1. Introduction and context

I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as Commissioner for children's services on 16th May 2019, as part of the Statutory Direction to Stoke on Trent City Council in relation to children's social care. My responsibilities required me to support the improvement of children's social care and review the Council's capacity and capability to improve children's services going forward.

The Council has been extremely welcoming and co-operative, and has sought to provide full support to enable me to undertake this task. I am very grateful for this.

2. Terms of reference

The Direction states that the Secretary of State has carefully considered Ofsted's report of 18 March 2019 of its inspection carried out in February. The inspection report found that children's services are 'inadequate'. The 3 sub-judgements for children who need help and protection, children looked after and achieving permanence, and leadership, management and governance were all rated as 'inadequate'.

The Direction appointed me as Commissioner, requiring me:

- a) To issue any necessary instructions to the local authority for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the authority's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- b) To bring together evidence to assess the council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the council.
- c) To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the local authority, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the council and key partners.
- d) To report to the Minister of State for Children and Families by 9 September 2019.

3. Process

In the 4 months leading up to delivery of this report I have sought, as far as possible, to use existing forums and observation of practice, not to put additional pressure on the service to attend meetings or gather information that they would not otherwise be doing. I have reviewed available relevant background information, as well as more current information presented to the Children Services Improvement Board and to other key Council and multi-agency fora.

During this period, I have met frequently with the political and officer leadership of the Council. I have worked with the City Director, the interim Director of Children's Services and the interim Assistant Director - Early Intervention and Children's Social Care, to support them with planned and developing improvement activity, to identify

any additional areas for improvement and development and to advise them on how best to address those.

In addition, I have met with staff groups, visited front line services and met with key partners to discuss the issues from their perspectives and to support them with their role in improving practice.

4. Context

In 1997 Stoke on Trent became a unitary authority, consisting of 6 main towns: Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton, and Fenton. Previously it was part of Staffordshire and there continue to be links with the county and some joint strategic partnerships and services.

The level of deprivation in the area is high. According to the Stoke-on-Trent Children, Young People and Families' plan 2016-2020 the latest edition of the Indices of Deprivation (2015) ranks Stoke-on-Trent as the 14th most deprived district in England compared with its previous rank of 16th. Based on a snapshot, as at 31st August 2013, there were 14,810 children and young people living in poverty (low-income families) in the city, which is 25.4% of the 0-19 population.

Deprivation is likely to lead to higher demand for support. Families who are struggling financially are more likely to find it difficult to cope with additional pressures such as disability, mental ill- health and bereavement. Many schools in Stoke on Trent have reported significant numbers of children entering reception lacking communication and social skills appropriate for their age. In addition, early help and social care staff report, anecdotally, an unusually high number of very large families with more than 5 children, with some workers involved in families with as many as 10 or 12 children.

The leadership of the Council describe a 'One Council, One Vision, One Team' approach which '*places children and families and the directorate that supports our most vulnerable at the heart of our organisation*'. The priorities of the Council are captured in The Stronger Together Strategic Plan 2016-2020 which provides a clear vision for Stoke-on-Trent, to '*create a city we can all be proud of.*' This vision is underpinned by five priorities which guide the work of the Council, mainly based on the environment, and support for business and residents, but including: Support vulnerable people in our communities to live their lives well.

Beneath these priorities sit a number of strategic objectives, including those particularly relevant to the delivery of children's services: "Reduce the risk of harm and neglect to vulnerable adults and children, enable young people leaving care to live independently and safely, protect and improve physical and mental health and wellbeing, support our schools to deliver a step change in education so that every child and young person has access to a school rated good or better and continue to increase the number of 18-24 year olds to gain the skills they need to secure the employment of their choice.

The strategic ambitions for children and young people are captured in the Children and Young Peoples' Plan for 2016-20, which describes an overall vision: '*all children and young people in the city are happy, safe and healthy, inspired and enabled to succeed.*' Underpinning the vision are 6 priorities: reduce the impact of child poverty,

make a positive difference to children and young people through parenting, early help and support for children and families that need it most, improve emotional wellbeing and mental health, and prepare young people for adulthood.

Plans are of course important but only if they drive progress and deliver on high ambitions. Those relating to improving the lives of the most vulnerable children in the city have clearly not delivered on the intentions. Implementation and impact would require strong political and officer leadership to maintain focus on delivery.

5. Leadership

Political Leadership

Political leadership in Stoke on Trent is complex and complicated.

There are 44 Councillors from 29 wards. As the table below shows there have been significant periods when no party held overall control requiring agreements between parties to enable an administration to be formed.

Party in control	Years
Labour	1997–2002
No overall control	2002–2004
Labour	2004–2006
No overall control	2006–2011
Labour	2011–2015
No overall control	2015–present

In May 2015, 21 Labour councillors, 14 City Independent councillors, 7 Conservative and 2 UK Independence party councillors were elected. The City Independents were originally formed of independent councillors, either not part of, or who had left an existing political party. They came together as a group to enable them to become part of the Council's administration. In 2015, despite Labour being the largest group, the City Independents formed a coalition with the Conservative group. The Leader, Councillor Dave Conway was a City Independent councillor, and the leader of the Conservative group, Councillor Abi Brown became the deputy leader. Councillor Ann James, a City Independent councillor, became cabinet member responsible for children social care, as well as adult services and health. Another City Independent Councillor, Janine Bridges, who was responsible for economy and education was the named lead member for children's services. In May 2018, the then Leader retired due to ill-health and Councillor James became the Leader. Responsibility for children social care transferred to Councillor Bridges, who remained the lead member.

In the recent May elections, 16 Labour councillors, 15 Conservative councillors, 12 City independents and one independent councillor were elected. The administration continues to be a coalition between the Conservatives and the City Independents. However, the previous deputy Leader, Councillor Brown is now the Leader, and the previous Leader has become the deputy Leader. Councillor Brown has appointed a new lead member for children services, Councillor David Evans, from the Conservative

group, although the previous lead member, Councillor Bridges, has retained responsibility for education.

There is now a new administration in place, although as described above, with previous cabinet members retaining a role in the new cabinet. Whilst there are differing views about the factors which contributed to the deterioration in children's services, there is agreement that the number one priority for the Council is to improve children's services. The scale of change needed is significant and is likely to take at least two to three years, but longer-term sustainability is equally important.

Two key points emerge. First, the financial pressures facing the Council, are serious and lie at the centre of politicians' concerns. However, there is a danger that this emphasis may get in the way of the essential need for political drive to support the officer leadership in order to make the necessary improvements a reality.

Secondly, because of continued changes in the administration and the ongoing necessity for councillors from different parties to work together, it is imperative that there is full political support across parties for the plans relating to children's social care, to support future sustainability of improvements made.

The new lead member has worked hard in a short time to understand the key issues. He is very proactive in visiting front line staff and attending staff engagement sessions which is welcomed by staff. He has readily accepted support from myself and from the LGA and other experienced lead members to help him ensure that going forward he can offer strong challenge and support to the service and the wider system. He is passionate about improving outcomes for the children and young people in Stoke on Trent, and is keen to ensure that this remains the highest priority for the Council.

Senior Officer Leadership

The current City Director (Chief Executive) has been in the role since 2016. He was previously the Director of Place in the Council. From 2013 until 2016, the post of Director of People had responsibility for Adult Services, Housing and Children Services. In 2016, the then Director of People became the Director of Children Services (DCS), with adult services and housing being transferred to separate Directors. At the same time changes described in the next section were made to front line service delivery.

There have been many relatively recent changes in senior management, and both the DCS and AD are interim appointments. A recruitment process for a permanent DCS was started but has been paused pending the outcome of this review. The City Director has secured a Chief Executive role in another local authority and will be leaving Stoke-on-Trent. A recruitment process is underway to secure a new City Director and to minimise any transition period.

6. Management of children's services

In 2014, the City Council established 'co-operative working' under an Assistant Director, who reported to the then Director of People. This was intended to be a

locality based all age family focused early intervention service, and included a number of children's services – Troubled Families, children centres, youth service, family support, education welfare and youth offending service – as well as housing management and some adult services.

In 2016, an organization called People too were commissioned by the LGA and Stoke-on-Trent City Council to undertake a review of Children's Social Care. One of their recommendations was to significantly reduce management and operational costs of Co-Operative Working by merging it into the operational structure of Children's Social Care so that it would be strategically aligned to the agenda of reducing demand, and to achieve efficiency savings.

The then Leader of the Council took the decision to disband co-operative working and moved all the services supporting children and families into an early intervention service under the Assistant Director (AD) for Children's Social Care, but with a significant reduction of budget and posts, including the loss of the Assistant Director role and 4 Strategic Managers (equivalent of Heads of Service in other Local Authorities). The Strategic Manager responsible for children in care was seconded for 9 months to manage the newly transferred locality services, and her post was covered by an acting up arrangement.

The then AD Children Social Care post was re-designated AD Early Intervention and Children's Social Care. These changes in management in 2017, were followed by much more widespread changes the following year. Although there was a period of stability between 2015 and May 2018 in the DCS and AD roles, there were significant changes in senior management in the year leading up to the Ofsted inspection and immediately following the inspection, creating uncertainty and lack of clear direction.

In May 2018 the AD for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care left, and the post was covered by an interim AD for 3 months, then a permanent new AD. During that year the Strategic Manager responsible for safeguarding was seconded to liquid logic implementation, with her post initially covered by an acting up arrangement, then an interim Strategic Manager. The Strategic Managers for children in care and quality assurance (QA) and the principal social worker all resigned, as did a further temporary acting-up Strategic Manager. 3 interim Strategic Managers covering Front Door, adoption and fostering and QA were brought in. During this period there were also 2 changes in AD learning services.

So many changes in senior and middle management posts in children's services in a relatively short period will inevitably have had an impact on continuity of leadership and ability to implement necessary change

Management of social work teams – the POD arrangement

Since 2012 Stoke on Trent had organised its children's social workers in 'PODs'. The PODs were small teams with 3 or 4 social workers, supported by social work assistants and an administrator and managed by practice managers, who in turn were managed by principal managers who reported to Strategic Managers. Members of a POD had cases allocated to them but were also collectively responsible for the work of the POD and would respond if an allocated worker was on leave or off sick. Supervision

consisted of weekly group supervision of cases, and bi-monthly individual supervision by principal managers.

During the focussed visit in 2018, Ofsted commented on the POD arrangement - *Staff in Stoke-on-Trent work in a service that is both challenging and supportive. Social workers and their managers recognise that they would not be able to manage the consistently high volumes of work without the council's 'systemic approach'. A number of small teams or 'pods' supported by social work assistants and an administrator are collectively responsible for the work.*

Front door / MASH (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub)

The MASH was established in 2011, an initiative across Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent to create a police-led multi-agency information sharing and access point responding to both adult and children's safeguarding issues in both local authorities. The location chosen was in Staffordshire, at a distance of about 10 miles from Stoke. Since it was established, a small number of Stoke's children's social care staff have been based there, as well as police and health officers. The MASH is managed by a former senior Police Officer who is employed by Staffordshire County Council on behalf of Stoke and Staffordshire.

The role of the MASH is limited. The focus of the MASH has been on information sharing and making a decision on whether a referral is a safeguarding matter which requires follow up. Follow up in the form of home visits as part of an assessment or S47 child protection investigation are done by social workers and police based in Stoke.

7. Background

a. Ofsted inspection of services June 2015

The Ofsted inspection for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board took place in June 2015. The overall judgement was 'require improvement to be good.' Whilst there were no widespread or serious failures that left children at risk of harm, there were some clear recommendations to improve quality assurance, the quality of care plans, and the recording of supervision and management oversight.

At a strategic level the Local Safeguarding Children Board was criticised for not offering a sufficiently rigorous and transparent assessment of the performance and effectiveness of local services. The Board did not identify why the positive range of early help services was not reducing the number of referrals to children's social care. Nor did it evaluate the reasons for the rising numbers of children in care, the falling numbers of child protection plans or the effectiveness of private fostering arrangements.

b. People too review August 2016

People too were commissioned by the LGA and Stoke-on-Trent City Council to undertake a review of Children's Social Care in August 2016. They looked at a range of service areas with a main focus on identifying measures which would help achieve financial efficiencies equating to £6.9m per year, the level at which Children's Social Care was projected to overspend in 2016/17. The overspend was similar to that of previous years. The main findings were that demand for children's social care services in Stoke on Trent exceeded national, regional, and statistical neighbour comparisons. With the exception of Child Protection statistics, Stoke on Trent generally had higher demand for services than its statistical neighbours with whom it shared similar characteristics.

People too commented that the costs associated with managing such demand creates significant budget pressures. Although Ofsted had considered that thresholds were being correctly applied at the point of entry to care, People too found that more could be done to support families earlier and to support children's pathway out of care once they are in. Co-operative working services were not working closely enough with children's social care.

They made a number of clear recommendations, including:

- Significantly reduce management and operational costs of Co-Operative Working by merging it into the operational structure of Children's Social Care so that not only is it strategically aligned to the agenda of reducing demand, but there are efficiency savings that can be achieved.
- Merge the budget for Co-Operative Working with that of Children's Social Care, so that any efficiency savings made through the above reduction can offset the projected overspend in Children's Social Care.
- Re-invest some of the efficiency savings in strengthening the resource of the Placement Support Team "Edge of Care" function.
- Re-invest in developing early help involving partners and children centres.

There were additional recommendations relating to improving care planning, reviewing referral thresholds, better use of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) challenge, increased use of Family Group Conferences and use of Special Guardianship Orders, recruiting more local foster carers, reducing supervised contact unless high risk, and reducing delay in placing children on placement orders for adoption.

Had these recommendations been acted upon this would have made a big difference. However, they were not robustly taken forward or implemented.

c. Joint local area SEND inspection in Stoke – September 16

The report on the outcome of this inspection is generally positive with no action plan required. The inspectors commented positively on good early identification and meeting need and good engagement with parents, but were critical of the lack of ambitious plans and a lack of sufficient health and social care involvement.

d. Focused visit in April 2018.

In April 2018 Ofsted undertook a two-day focussed visit in Stoke-on-Trent, evaluating the Local Authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable adolescents. The findings were positive about multi agency working and early intervention, some examples of innovative practice with schools and direct work with young people, and that despite high workloads, morale was good and staff retention was high. Concerns were raised about the level of management oversight and supervision, and very high caseloads. They recommended that:

- Continuous allocation of high numbers of cases to staff in social work teams needs to be reviewed and risk assessed. In particular, work allocated to newly qualified staff needs to be commensurate with their level of experience and expertise.
- Actions arising from the monthly supervision of cases need to be recorded clearly, within a prescribed time frame, and routinely reviewed and evaluated by managers.
- The insufficient capacity of managers and 'pod' administrators to routinely record decisions and case discussion needs to be revised.

The DCS reported the findings to councillors in July 2018 as background to a bid for funding for additional staffing as follows: -

“social work caseloads are too high, with the majority of staff working at capacity. Although no young people were found to be at immediate risk, inspectors question the appropriateness of social workers being expected to provide 30 vulnerable children, who have extremely complex needs, with a consistently effective service. This is not sustainable. Insufficient recording of managers' decisions and 'pod' supervision on children files means that it is unclear whether work is being tracked and reviewed.

During the verbal feedback Inspectors reported that should the caseloads remain at this level, particularly for newly qualified social workers who are in their first year (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)), and as such have a controlled and reduced caseload, the LA Children's Service, currently judged as 'Requires Improvement', would not be able to secure a 'Good' judgement, regardless of any further progress made. The caseloads being a limiting judgement under the ILACS framework.

A future inspection of Children's Services under the 'Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) arrangements' is likely to occur within the next 12 months. A detrimental outcome of the inspection receiving a judgment of 'Inadequate' would present the Council with significant challenges both at a reputational and financial level.”

The DCS subsequently confirmed to the City Director that the Council should pause the decision around additional investment to allow time for the DCS and AD to fully develop a strategy.

Whilst some steps were taken by the DCS and AD to address the issues around workloads and supervision, they were not well implemented and they had not had the

desired impact before the inspection in February 2019. Changes included safeguarding teams being required to take on care proceedings to reduce the pressure on the children in care teams, and the creation of temporary assessment teams to reduce pressure on the safeguarding teams.

e. Changes brought in following the focussed visit

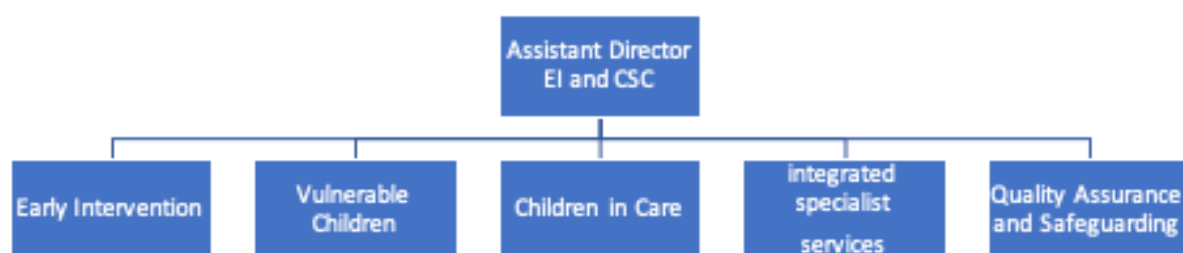
The previous permanent AD started in July 2018. She proposed a number of changes, to respond to concerns about workloads, practice and supervision. The issues facing the service had been summarised by her predecessor, the interim AD who covered the role from April-July 2018. The key issues were: insufficient capacity in some areas, managers spread too thinly, not working as a joined-up service, system overload and handovers happening in the wrong places, in addition to budget pressures, very high numbers of Children in Care but low numbers of children subject to Child Protection plans.

She proposed a range of measures aimed at reducing demand including changes to how work was received and dealt with. It was intended to move to a model of teams, and individual supervision of social workers, with implementation planned for January 2019. Alongside this was a plan to revise thresholds to prevent family breakdown and reconcile families sooner, to create an integrated front door, introduce robust step up / step down processes, discharge Care Orders of children placed at home and introduce a new approach to permanency. Alongside this, capacity would be increased by setting up assessment teams aligned to the front door, introducing a social work apprentice programme, expanding number of Personal Assistants, creating court officer role and QA officer role.

Key changes included new Strategic Manager roles, introducing an AD led weekly placement panel, new recruitment strategy, new QA framework and practice standards, piloting SMART phones, embedding the new case management system Liquid Logic and refurbishment of the main base for social workers in Stoke, Swann House. Whilst it was not made explicit that the POD system was to change what was proposed clearly meant a major shift from the existing system. The proposals included increased emphasis on Principal managers to manage Team managers (formerly practice managers) and drive practice improvement. Caseloads would reduce to a target of 100-120 per team, 16 per SW (20 initially), team case discussion to be retained but should not replace individual supervision.

The new case recording system, Liquid Logic, was also introduced in July 2018. Whilst there are obvious benefits for social workers from a new more efficient I.T. system, it needs to be properly planned and implemented to maximise the benefits and minimise the risk of data being lost from the previous system. It is clear from many accounts across the service that this did not happen. There remains a real need to simplify forms and interactions, which is now being tackled.

Previous structure



New structure from January 2019



This was an ambitious programme of change across the whole service which would have required all managers, who were themselves involved in changed roles or new to the service, to fully support and help drive forward. Some changes were made in the few months before the inspection but not sufficient, nor sufficiently well planned, to make a difference.

f. Ingson review October 2018

Ingson are independent consultants with considerable experience working with LAs on children's social care issues, specialising in management development, process and practice improvement and diagnostics. They were asked by the then AD to review practice and processes in Stoke. The context was the outcome of the focussed visit, rising numbers of children in care, budget pressures and high workloads. They raised serious concerns about the poor quality of practice, particularly in child protection and children in need, and the lack of 1-1 casework supervision and management oversight.

In November 2018, Ingson reported back to the Council Leader, Lead Member and City Director, just before the Ofsted inspection. Their main conclusions were that practice in Stoke was being distorted by complex processes and formats which require urgent simplification and was often quite poor. Views of partner agencies were often missing from case records, children's voices were not clearly articulated and assessment analysis weak. *'Checks and balances' to poor or unfocused practice are missing, e.g. the existence of regular, reflective and challenging 1:1 supervision*.

Their key recommendations were to simplify the current contact, referral forms and child and family assessment forms, to urgently review existing formats for recording CP and CiN plans, to design a training programme with the aim of improving assessment, child protection enquiry and care planning practice, to implement a new model of supervision for Stoke which establishes a single supervisor and regular monthly 1:1 supervision for all workers and that Social work assistants should no longer hold case responsibility for child in need cases nor should they conduct

assessments or statutory visits

In the view of the 2 consultants undertaking this review the rise in numbers of children in care and increased pressure on CIC teams led to the changes for safeguarding teams having to take on care proceedings with little preparation or training. In addition, the creation of assessment teams was poorly managed and implemented.

They found that the Strategic Managers were not fully involved in, and committed to the changes which will have impacted on how well they were planned, received and implemented.

g. Self-assessment January 2019

The Council produced a self-assessment as part of its preparation for the anticipated Ofsted full inspection. The report emphasised strengths including the work of the Youth Offending Service, response to Child Sexual Exploitation and the multi-agency service for children with disabilities. Reference is made to issues of high demand, high caseloads, the need to improve care planning, supervision and management oversight, and plans in place to address this. Overall the report is relatively positive and does not reflect the level of concern that the practice issues required, the impact on the city's most vulnerable children and the urgency in the need to address those issues.

The final statement reflects the approach taken: *"We believe that we know ourselves well and in addition to celebrating our strengths, we have clear plans being implemented to address areas where practice, recording and outcomes need to improve."*

8. Ofsted inspection of children's services – Feb 2019

The inspection was carried out between 4 February and 15 February 2019. The inspection report found that children's services are 'inadequate'. The sub-judgements for children who need help and protection, children looked after and achieving permanence and leadership, management and governance were all rated as 'inadequate'.

In summary Ofsted found a service with very high numbers of children in care, 56 of them in un-regulated placements, no individual case supervision and limited evidence of management oversight on cases, little support for foster carers, significant drift and delay, very high caseloads of 25 plus, poor use of performance information and auditing, risk not being appropriately identified, little evidence of the voice of the child informing decision making.

The key findings of the inspection outlined similar concerns to those described by Ingson in their review:

"Children are not being protected, and they experience serious and widespread delays in having their needs met across children's services. Leaders have not sufficiently understood the extent and impact of the failures and have been ineffective in prioritising, challenging and making improvements. As a result of poor leadership,

management oversight and an absence of clearly evaluated performance information, services for children have seriously declined since the last full Ofsted inspection in 2015, and the majority of recommendations made at that inspection and at a focused visit in 2018 have not been actioned. Vulnerable children are not safeguarded in Stoke-on-Trent. A coherent framework to support the delivery of social work to children and families has not been implemented. Inspectors did meet a considerable number of dedicated and committed social workers. However, they are not being supported to practise safely. No social worker is receiving one-to-one case supervision, and this means that there is little management direction and challenge to their work. Thresholds are not consistently applied by both partner agencies and social work staff. Risk is not robustly managed. Children's experiences and their views are not at the centre of social work practice. The local authority is not routinely working in partnership with families in securing parental consent to undertake enquiries and assessment and to voluntarily accommodate children.

Permanence planning is absent for many children. Too many children come into care in a crisis or wait too long to be reunited with their families. There are insufficient fostering placements to meet local need and many children are placed in unregulated placements. The local authority knows that some of these placements are unsafe. Support for care leavers is variable, with children reporting positively about their social workers. However, education support is limited, which results in far too many care leavers not being in employment, education and training

In other cases, contacts and referrals are being closed inappropriately without full consideration of risk. Where there are clear presenting issues of children being injured and at risk of significant harm, inspectors saw cases which were closed without actions being taken to protect the children. Staff and managers are not appropriately considering previous historical concerns when making decisions about risk.

When decisions are made to escalate to PLO, all work that could have been done to support children and their families prior to attending a legal gateway meeting has rarely been completed in advance. This work includes, for example, updating assessments or convening family group conferences to explore support and make clear contingency plans. This results in some children remaining in high levels of risk when they should have been removed urgently for their own safety."

9. The Council's response

The outcome of the inspection was not a surprise to the senior leadership, although the extent of problems in the service were much greater than they had thought. The previous DCS left the Council, moving to a new post, the week before the inspection started. The City Director brought in the current interim DCS (who had previously been the interim AD for 3 months during 2018) and he started on the day Ofsted arrived.

When the City Director first realised the extent of the problems, he took immediate action. He set up and initially chaired a shadow improvement board which met fortnightly, involving partners from health, schools, the police and a representative of the voluntary sector. He also ensured regular contact with DFE officers and from the LGA children's advisor and welcomed their advice and support. He secured agreement to a 'mini' budget of in year financial support to invest in children services

improvement, providing additional resources to expand the number of social workers and staffing establishment significantly. In April, the AD left the Council and an experienced interim AD took over the operational management of the service.

The interim DCS brought in two consultants as 'Improvement Partners', one taking responsibility for developing an Improvement Plan, and for reviewing children on Care Orders placed at home with parents, and those in unregulated placements. The other consultant brought in a team of auditors and established an auditing process, initially intended to review all 3000 plus open cases, but later reduced to a more manageable and focussed number. A third consultant was brought in to begin a review of expensive residential and independent fostering placements to work with the service to identify children and young people who can be safely moved on.

The initial focus was on addressing the concerns about the front door and improving communication with staff. Both the City Director and interim DCS attended a number of staff engagement sessions to hear the views of staff.

In May the local election resulted in changes in the political administration. The City Director wished to appoint an independent chair of the Improvement Board, and given my role and involvement, I agreed to do this. The new Leader, new Lead Member and new Chair of Scrutiny all became members of the Improvement Board which moved to meeting monthly to allow actions to be progressed between meetings. The Chair of Scrutiny is keen to develop the role of scrutiny and is working hard to create a much more appropriately challenging forum.

The Lead Member has quickly made changes to the corporate parenting panel, which previously was a quarterly forum that allowed any elected member to attend, with a chair being elected at each meeting and no clear terms of reference or associated action planning. The lead member is now chairing a much more formal and appropriate panel which should greatly improve the over-sight of children in care, and their involvement in decisions which affect them.

The interim DCS established an operational board which also meets monthly, includes partner agencies and staff representatives.

An overly detailed and complex Improvement Plan was developed. The initial priorities were to finalise the Plan and agree the reporting arrangements across the partnership, to establish arrangements for staff engagement and to review the QA strategy and audit programme. The assurance audits undertaken by the external team were intended to identify if there are any children who may be at risk, with prompt follow up by managers to safeguard them. Alongside this to review the structure and short term plans to ensure that cases are allocated, improve work in the MASH, focus on early permanency planning for looked after children and review performance data sets to ensure that they are fit for purpose and enable management grip and regulatory compliance.

The City Director also initiated a process to recruit a permanent DCS. This process has not yet concluded.

The senior leadership have been very receptive to offers of support and advice from

the DFE, from the LGA, from the West Midlands Region sector led support, from local authority Partners in Practice, and from others who have had similar experiences with children's services.

Leeds report

In May, Leeds DCS and a small team of experienced managers undertook a short diagnostic arranged by the Department for Education. Leeds is an outstanding authority and a DFE appointed Partner in Practice. The purpose of the visit was to support Stoke with the development of their action plan in response to the recommendations of the Ofsted Inspection.

Their conclusion was that there had been a failure in senior leadership for some time. Examples of this were that several initiatives, which have been successfully employed elsewhere, such as 'Signs of Safety', had been purchased but not properly implemented. *"Front-line practitioners and staff have been faced with a series of new practice tools and approaches, which appear to have been agreed at senior management level with little or no discussion with the people that would be expected to use them. Little attention was paid to the context in which social workers and team managers were operating in, which meant that they did not have the time and space to successfully use new tools even if there had been an adequate plan for implementation."* The report also mentions the introduction of the assessment teams and the more recent examples of the new supervision policy and the preparation of the Improvement Plan as other areas where staff have not felt consulted or involved.

They recommended that the Director of Children's Services needs to have a clear consultation and communication strategy to ensure that in future front-line practitioners and managers understand and own changes.

In terms of practice they recommended the assessment teams are disbanded as soon as possible and that a quick decision is made about the model of practice with a proper implementation plan developed to ensure that practitioners and partners understand how the model will help to improve outcomes for children and young people in Stoke, are fully trained to use it and that the environment in which they practice enables them to use it properly.

They also made recommendations on changes to the MASH, improving morale, simplifying the improvement plan, improving performance information, auditing, moving social work teams to localities linked with early help, establishing regular supervision and improving the work with children looked after.

These recommendations are being followed up, many through the re-alignment proposals which were issued to staff at the beginning of August for consultation.

Re-alignment proposals

At the beginning of August, a 30-day consultation process started in relation to proposals on a service re-alignment. The key aim is to create an improved environment to support social workers to deliver high quality practice. The consultation paper states:

A key priority in the realignment of services is to consolidate the changes made earlier on in the year to address the shortfalls inherent in the pod based system. Whilst we do not wish to lose the benefits of peer support and reflective case discussion that the pod system provided it is imperative that robust case management oversight and individual supervision is fully embedded. As previously agreed practice managers will be designated as team managers with responsibility for the supervision of workers within their team and managerial oversight of the cases allocated to those workers. All cases will have a clearly defined primary case worker.

As part of the service realignment it is also accepted that there has been a need to reflect upon some of the temporary changes made at the beginning of the year which with hindsight have created additional pressures and churn across the service. Within these proposals it is therefore acknowledged that there is a need to restore some previous service settings in order to maintain a child centred approach which maintains continuity of support to families rather than serving internal business processes.

There are 3 proposed phases of change. The first to be implemented in September 2019 will make some changes to Strategic Manager roles, and stepping down the temporary assessment teams to use resource as part of an enhanced locality based service of Children's Assessment and Safeguarding Teams (CAST)

The second phase to be implemented in November 2019 will focus on strengthening the response to children in care, including creating a separate leaving care service, and improving fostering and court related work. The third phase to be implemented in January 2020 will focus on consolidating Early Intervention structures including Youth Offending Service and the Youth Service, and improving links to the front door. The service will be re- designated as the Early Help service. Improvements will also be made to quality assurance and targeted support.

10. Current service issues

Performance

The Improvement Board meets monthly and receives a performance report with data against most key children's services indicators. Initially the quality of data and analysis was poor but this has improved and work is ongoing to continue to develop the information and knowledge available to understand performance in the service.

Areas of particular concern in August, in addition to the numbers of children in care and children in need, were % of child and family assessments completed in 45 days (71%), % of children on a CIN plan visited in last 20 days (39%), the % of initial child protection conferences held within 15 days. Some areas are improving including social work visits to children in care and reduction in number of unregulated placements.

The Council brought in a team of independent auditors but unfortunately this has not resulted in a regular programme of auditing cases, that gives us a snapshot of whether improvements to the quality of practice are being seen. Too much time has been spent on developing a new framework and process and too little on actual case auditing and analysis. However, the auditors have been able to support the assessment work which remains an area of high pressure and demand.

MASH

The Leeds review identified a number of significant concerns regarding the functioning of the MASH. The current focus of the MASH is on information sharing rather than delivering the most appropriate response to children and young people in need. These result in a high rate of contacts and referrals coming to the MASH to which Children's Services in Stoke must respond. Current arrangements have resulted in poor quality of referrals and lack of understanding of the role and responsibilities of Children's Services by partners.

Previous leaders and managers in Stoke had failed to engage directly with partners, in particular the police, to address these issues. The temporary solution of introducing assessment teams in January 2019 seems to have compounded the difficulties as social workers based at the MASH were moved out at short notice. At the time of the Ofsted inspection these changes had only recently taken place and it is not surprising that they were concerned about how referrals were being responded to.

Arrangements around the MASH are overly complex. The social care recording system Liquid Logic does not interface with the recording system in the MASH resulting in information having to be entered twice by practitioners. This not only increases the length of time required to record information and make decisions; it is also very frustrating for practitioners and increases the risk for error.

A key issue identified is that of consent. The Leeds review found that there seems to be a lack of understanding that the issue of consent is different for different agencies. There is a clear difference of opinion between the MASH manager and the children's services practitioners and professionals on this issue. The MASH manager is not necessarily incorrect about the application of the law as it applies to the police. However, the statutory and professional requirements that apply to social workers are different, requiring parents to be aware of and in agreement with sharing of information if there is no immediate risk to a child.

The current MASH arrangement cannot simply be about information sharing. The MASH should be the access point for families and professionals requiring advice and support from Children and Families. Since the inspection, the Council at the most senior level have met with police and health to try to address these concerns. It has taken too long to make progress on this. However, a new very experienced interim Strategic Manager, covering MASH and assessment, and a new experienced interim Service Manager for the MASH, joined Stoke within the past 2 months and are now actively making necessary changes to the working arrangements in the MASH.

Early help

Since 2017, following the disbanding of 'co-operative working', early help services for children moved to form 'early intervention' alongside children's social care. At the same time there was a significant reduction in posts, though not in buildings.

At the time of the inspection, changes had only recently been made to the MASH to develop an integrated front door to early help as well as to children's social care. This was done quickly and further changes need to be made as part of the work described above.

The current service is based around 6 localities and includes family support workers (including Troubled Family work), the Youth Offending Service, support for young carers and the supervised contact service. Despite the major reduction in staffing there remain about 150 staff. Services are delivered from the children centres, where there are partner agencies co-located, such as health visitors, midwifery, neighbourhood police, DWP employment advisors and adult learning.

Whilst the interface with children's social care has improved, this has only occurred recently and is not well embedded. The People too review found that although well-funded and well-staffed, the co-operative working approach did not have an evidential impact on reducing the need for statutory social care intervention. They suggested that the then co-operative working team were not prioritising the right cases, those at the edge of social care intervention.

At that time, the lack of an outcome focus to plans was resulting in cases drifting. This did not lead to improved outcomes for children and families and was creating a waiting list for the service, some being cases that children's social care was looking to step down. It is not clear if the approach has changed sufficiently to help meet current demand.

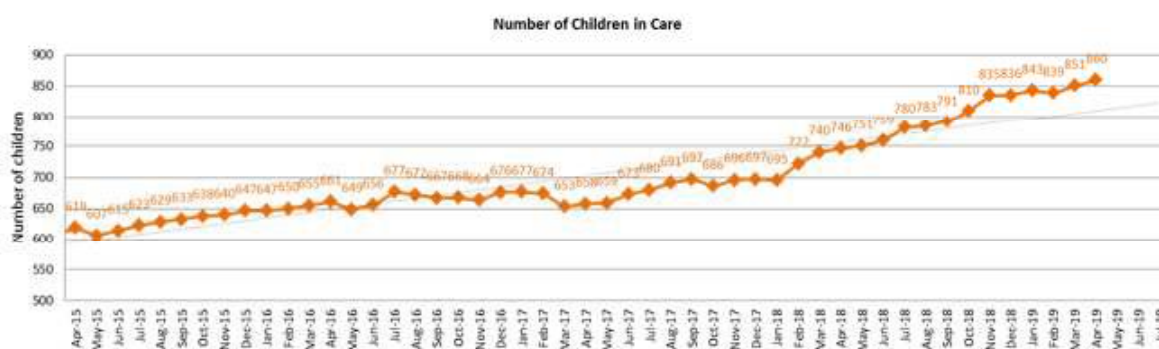
The staff in early help are now required to record on Liquid Logic but limited work was done to consider how their work would best be reflected on this system. As a result, early help staff complain of having to use the complicated long assessment forms which they do not feel help reflect the work they do, and are very time consuming.

Unusually, Ofsted did not look at early help in February. A good locally based multi-agency early help service is essential in helping to reduce demand on statutory social work. There are plans to update the early help strategy which has been in place since 2017. There is too little monitoring of the current service to know how well it is supporting children and families. Work is needed to properly review the contribution by early help, the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families and the links with social care to maximise the impact of this part of the service response. It is a priority of the Improvement Board to over-see this.

Safeguarding and Children in care

The most pressing practice and financial demands arise from the number of children in care in Stoke-on-Trent, and the continued rise in those numbers since 2015.

Between 2017 and 2019, there was a 12% increase in children in care compared to a 3% increase nationally, a 4% increase regionally and an 8% increase for statistical neighbours. At April 2019, there were 860 children in the care of the city council: this rose to 890 at the beginning of August. This is an increase from 746 children at the end of April 2018. The graph below shows this trend and the total number of children in care over the last 4 years.



Addressing this has been a major priority for the Council. The previous administration held fortnightly meetings with the previous DCS to try to address what was happening. The approach was based on the financial impact. There are no minutes of these meetings but it is clear from the reflections of those involved, that the then DCS and AD were not able to provide the confidence to the Deputy Leader, who had the lead for finance, and to the City Director, that they were tackling demand effectively.

There are several contributing factors relating to the continued rise. Increasing numbers resulted in high caseloads which have meant that plans for children have not progressed. This was compounded by the lack of case supervision in the POD arrangement. The quality of intervention with families at points where care might be avoided has not been good enough. Poor use of Family Group conferences, poor Children in Need planning, and lack of effective use of the Public Law Outline to identify families' needs and find a way to help them address those, have not helped.

There are high numbers of children on Care Orders placed at home and not discharged, and high numbers of children in unregulated placements (56 at the time of the inspection, now down to 18). Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) challenge has not been effective. Too few children have been discharged through permanency arrangements, such as Special Guardianship Orders. Over 60 children subject to Placement Orders have not moved onto adoptive placements.

There are about 250 local foster carers. The local active Foster Carer Association tries to ensure carers support each other, but they are critical about the level of support carers have received in recent years from the Council. The service is now addressing poor practice issues, including non-compliance around medicals, DBS checks,

frequency of unannounced visits and annual reviews. Adoption is moving to regional arrangements with Staffordshire, Telford and Shropshire.

Failure to recruit and support local foster carers has meant increasing use of independent fostering agencies and rising numbers of children in residential care. This has also increased the number of children placed outside of Stoke, with over 100 now in placements at a distance of 50 miles or more outside the authority. The time taken in travelling to visit those children adds to the workload pressures on social workers.

The Council has recently increased the number of IROs who previously had caseloads in excess of 100 children. The IROs describe an environment where they were not encouraged to offer too much challenge to social workers with high caseloads, but this is now changing alongside a newly refreshed escalation process.

Since 2011, the Council has invested in innovative residential provision, adapting Council 3 bedroomed properties to provide placements for 2 young people with complex needs in each house supported by a team of residential care staff. There are now 13 small group homes, plus one providing short breaks for disabled children, all judged good or outstanding. In addition, Stoke established the House project in 2017, funded by DFE as a positive example of a creative way to develop local accommodation for care leavers, who were also able to benefit from training on restoring the identified properties. These are good examples which the service can build on.

Child Protection case conference chairs have used the Signs of Safety model effectively for a number of years to provide an environment where it facilitates the involvement of parents and professionals. The chairs describe a high level of commitment from social workers to their children and families, but despite this social worker reports for conferences are often late, of poor quality and lacking analysis.

Other service areas

The areas identified by the Council's own self-assessment as performing well, appear to be in a stronger position. This includes the YOS and the Children with Disabilities (CWD) service. Both services benefit from being multi-agency and based in different locations from the main social work building. The YOS works very closely with police, and are a valued contributor to community safety working. However, they struggle to work as closely with social care as is needed, particularly for looked after children.

CWD service has 2 teams and support disabled children from point of assessment throughout their journey. They have around 330 allocated children, including 44 in care. Transition planning starts at 14 which is good practice. There were no specific concerns raised by Ofsted but as the service has not had any other external review in recent years, it would be sensible to review how well current arrangements support disabled children and their families from birth to adulthood.

11. Partnerships

The extent to which strategic partnerships in Stoke are driving improvement is not clear. The arrangements are complicated with many different multi-agency Boards and sub-groups, not clearly aligned. New senior leaders from different agencies have found it difficult to identify how and where collective decisions are made.

The Local Children Safeguarding Boards in Staffordshire and Stoke applied to the DFE last year to become an early adopter of new safeguarding arrangements. This was agreed. They took several months to agree the framework to establish a strategic Safeguarding partnership with both Councils represented by their DCS and lead member, with one senior police and CCG officer. This partnership will meet quarterly from July and oversee safeguarding in both areas. An operational much larger group has also been set up but has only met twice.

The revised arrangements have not yet become embedded and will take time to have an impact. However, for Stoke this is not good timing. Given the challenges facing children's services and the need for robust strategic leadership to drive improvement, it is not clear if combined arrangements with Staffordshire, a very different authority, will provide this. I believe these arrangements should be reviewed to determine if this will be in Stoke's interests at this time.

The Community safety partnership operates under the name of the Responsible Authorities Group (RAG) and is chaired by the AD for housing and community safety. Whilst the YOS has always been well represented, children's social care has not, but this is now changing. The RAG has a number of sub-groups looking at youth violence and gangs.

12. The wider system

The majority of schools in Stoke are academies, with only 1 secondary school and fewer than 20 in total, not academies. Exclusions in Stoke are high, amongst the highest in England. The number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) is also high, continues to grow and is higher than national and West Midlands' figures and that of statistical neighbours. Both these factors add to the pressures for vulnerable children and for social workers seeking to work with education to meet their needs. There is an active Secondary school's forum (SASCAL) and a less cohesive group of primary schools creating the potential for strengthening joint working and planning with schools and academies.

Schools have experienced difficulty working with social care and whilst positive about the work of some individual social workers, generally lack confidence in social care. Examples are given of social workers cancelling meetings at the last minute, good social workers being given too many cases to manage, a 3-week delay in getting a response from the front door. The interim DCS is committed to trying to work more closely with schools, and they are represented on the Improvement Board.

Opportunity Area Programme

Stoke is part of the 3-year Opportunity Area Programme, funded by DFE, which gave a total of £5.7m funding to 12 Opportunity Areas. The focus is on education, raising aspirations, extra-curricular activities, well-being, working with schools and improving social mobility. Separately, Stoke was successful in bidding for Better Together, which ran as a small pilot in a few schools in Stoke. The evidence looked promising and was presented to the OA Board which then decided to scale up the project and fund it to cover the whole city, with match funding from the council, up until August 2020. The project will be independently evaluated. This programme places a small team of 8 social workers in schools to help improve understanding of thresholds and support early intervention.

The joint chairs of the OA Board are not from any of the statutory agencies. The Board provides governance and oversight of the whole OA programme. They have included early years and improving take up of nursery provision as one of their priorities. Historically the Council at senior level has not engaged as actively with the Board as DFE and the Board would have wished but this is beginning to change. There has, however, been a good level of engagement at middle manager level. It has been difficult for the Board to find effective support from members of the Council whose focus tended to be on the financial benefits to Stoke, rather than the opportunities to improve outcomes for children.

The funding ends in August 2020 and those involved are very keen to ensure that there is learning from the investment, and that they secure sustainability for the future.

13. Staffing

As the tables below show, Stoke has benefitted from a loyal workforce. In terms of social workers, turnover has tended to be low, though higher in recent years amongst managers.

The existing staffing structure allows for a total of 150 FTE social worker posts across the Service which are deployed as follows: Vulnerable children (72), Children in care (27), Fostering and adoption (29), Children with disabilities (12), Front Door/EDT (10). There are at present 35 FTE vacancies across the service. Of these vacancies most of the roles are currently filled by agency workers.

Over 50% of the social work staff have been in Stoke longer than 5 years. Compared with many other councils, the use of agency staff has also been relatively low, until earlier this year when many were recruited to fill the assessment teams. 28 out of 132.6 FTE social workers are agency staff (about 22%), but 18 out of 28 front line managers (64%) are agency. Recruitment of experienced social workers is difficult and again like other councils Stoke has mainly been able to recruit NQSWs (newly qualified social workers). Stoke is also part of the Step up to social work and Frontline programmes. 44 of the social workers are ASYEs (NQSWs undertaking their assessed year of practice, and so should hold a reduced caseload.

Tables showing the number of agency workers

Job Title	Current number
Social Worker	6
Senior Social Worker	22
Practice Manager	15
Principal Manager	3

Role	0-6 months headcount	0-6m FTE	6-12 month headcount	6-12m FTE	1-2 years headcount	1-2y FTE	2-3 years headcount	2-3y FTE	3-5 years headcount	3-5y FTE	5+ years headcount	5+y FTE
Social Worker	1	0.5	1	0.5	3	3	10	10	11	11	42	35
Social Worker ASYE	10	10	7	6.5	17	15.5	6	5.81	1	1	3	2.5
Senior Social Worker			1	1	1	1			3	3	29	26.3
Practice Manager					2	2			1	1	21	20.5
Principal Manager			1	1							10	10

Total	Headcount	FTE
Social Worker	68	60
Social Worker ASYE	44	41.31
Senior Social Worker	34	31.3
Practice Manager	24	23.5
Principal Manager	11	11

Regional improvement activity support has been focussed on supporting Stoke in relation to securing staffing and in advising on short, medium- and long-term recruitment and retention activities. This support should be welcomed going forward.

Steady state workload across the service is generally within the region of 3000-3200 children's cases at any given point. It is hoped that with improved management grip on assessment thresholds and workflow, this number will reduce. Workloads across the service remain high. The re-alignment is an opportunity to review the number of posts in the establishment, and support should be sought from the region to consider how Stoke staffing levels compare with other local authorities with similar levels of demand.

Views of staff

Since the inspection, senior leaders have made engagement with staff a priority. A number of engagement events open to all staff have been held, staff reference groups have been established, and 2 staff representatives are included in the interim DCS's monthly operational group. Staff across the service are positive about the increased engagement and as the quotes below demonstrate, clear about the positives and challenges they face working in Stoke.

"last 12 months have been difficult, lot of change, before that lot of stability" (Strategic manager)

"such committed staff, devastated by outcome" (front line manager)

"what I love about Stoke, we all pull together" (senior SW)

"now I have 20 cases, lowest ever, feels nice" (SW)

"things going both too slow, and too fast, for example knee jerk setting up of the assessment teams" (front line manager)

"implementation never deep rooted" (IRO)

"we're confused, as we still in PODs or teams?" (SW in CIC)

"practice standards issued in November, not embedded" (front line manager)

"we work very hard, last few years it's got harder, relationships keep us in Stoke" (SW)

"1 year fixes, no long term plan" (EH manager)

14. Financial position

The financial position for the Council as a whole, and for children services in particular, is very challenging. The impact of the latter on the former is difficult and creates tensions amongst officers and members. Historically, children services have

overspent by £8m for a number of years. The position has been exacerbated because of the continued rise in numbers of children in care and the imperative to address the issues identified by Ofsted. Whilst improvements in assessments, care planning, and early intervention will begin to address this, this will take time to implement and impact.

The City Director identified an “Investing in Children” mini-budget to address these challenges. The sum of around £4m will mainly be used to fund additional agency social workers to reduce workloads, and to support the re-alignment proposals. In August, the Council revised its financial forecasts to be able to fund this investment and identified a need for a further saving requirement for 2019/20 of £5.5 million. Saving proposals are now being publicly consulted on, until 25 September 2019, to give the opportunity to all residents, elected members, staff and the media to comment.

There are also issues relating to the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which is the budget which funds the allocations made to schools and academies, and the provision of services in relation to high needs and early years’ pupils. The high needs funding of £32.54 million supports the provision for pupils and students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) from early years to 25. The challenge of growing demand for SEND services is a national issue but is a significant issue locally. The current % of pupils in specialist provision in Stoke-on-Trent is 2.03% compared with 1.13% nationally.

In 2018/19 the DSG carried forward a significant deficit balance of £14.240 million. The city council has submitted a recovery plan to the DfE to bring the deficit back in to balance over a five-year period, which assumes a transfer of £3.5 million for each of four years from the schools’ block. This was discussed at the Schools’ Forum in June 2019, but not agreed. The current plan assumes a further increase in the DSG deficit in 2019/20 of £5.253 million, and includes pressures relating to:

- the cost of independent sector placements;
- the number of permanent exclusions particularly within secondary provision;
- requests for Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans;
- an increase in specialist plans for young people aged 16-25 years due to changes within the SEND reforms.

There is a detailed plan to address those issues and discussions are ongoing with the Schools’ Forum in respect of how they can support the plan.

15. Summary of issues

1. Plans relating to improving the lives of the most vulnerable children in the city have clearly not delivered on the intentions.
2. The base budget for children’s services and the DSG budget both need to be stabilised in the long term. Short term investment will assist with the improvements needed.
3. The political administration is very new and given the make-up of the cabinet, will require time and effort to be a cohesive force focussed on what’s best for vulnerable children. It is also important that all 44 ward councillors recognise

their responsibility and role in supporting actions to improve services.

4. Changes in senior and middle management posts in children's services in a relatively short period have had an impact on continuity of leadership and ability to implement necessary change.
5. Had the recommendations from Ofsted in 2015 and 2018 on the need to improve quality assurance, the quality of care plans, the recording of supervision and management oversight and tackle the high caseloads, been acted upon effectively this would have made a big difference.
6. Whilst some steps were taken by the then DCS and AD to address the issues around workloads and supervision, they were not well implemented and they had not had the desired impact before the inspection in February 2019.
7. The rise in numbers of children in care and increased pressure on CIC teams led to the changes for safeguarding teams having to take on care proceedings with little preparation or training. In addition, the creation of assessment teams was poorly managed and implemented.
8. Work is needed to properly review the contribution by early help and the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families.
9. The safeguarding arrangements should be reviewed to determine if they will provide the necessary oversight and challenge for Stoke.
10. The re-alignment is an opportunity to review the number of posts in the establishment, and caseloads.
11. The service is facing a sizeable task, to cope with incoming demand, and at the same time address the impact of historical poor practice on children in its care.
12. The scale of change needed is significant and is likely to take at least two to three years, but longer-term sustainability is equally important.

16. Analysis of progress, capacity for improvement and conclusion

Stoke on Trent's children services were inspected by Ofsted in February 2019 and judged inadequate across all the domains. The Council have accepted the findings and have since the time of the inspection made changes, identified investment and begun a process of improvement across all aspects of the service.

Priorities have included an urgent need to improve the front door and assessments to start ensuring children and families have a better experience from the outset of seeking support. At the same time the service needs to deal with the consequences of poor practice and cases drifting, such as high numbers of children in unregulated placements or placed long term at home on care orders. This is a substantial task.

From 2015/2016 onwards the Council had identified the key issues following a previous Ofsted inspection and external review. Changes were made during this period, including introducing the model of practice Signs of Safety, a new caseload management system Liquid Logic and more recently employing dedicated assessment teams to seek to reduce pressures and improve practice. However, poor planning and implementation meant that these changes did not have the desired impact, exacerbated by continued rising care numbers, limited use of early intervention, and problems with how the MASH operated.

Management changes and loss of continuity in senior management at this time were also contributory factors.

The political focus, which influenced the officer leadership, was on the financial pressures and reducing those. Too little attention was paid to the experience of children and improving management oversight and case supervision.

Skilled social workers in a supportive environment, with manageable caseloads, good I.T., strong partnerships with other agencies, and good supervision can work with families with very complex needs very effectively. This means managing risk appropriately and making sound judgements about when parents can, with the right support, change their parenting behaviour to reduce the risk of harm to their child. It also means being able to judge when this is not going to happen, and that child needs greater protection, either with extended family or within the wider care system. Good social work can only happen when there is clear decision making, sound assessments, robust plans that are followed through, and most of all an ability to work with children directly, and their parents, to understand what it's like for them and how want things to change and improve. This has not consistently been in place in Stoke for some time.

The financial position for the Council and for children services, in relation to both the base budget and the Dedicated Schools Grant, is very difficult. Improvements in assessments, care planning, and early intervention will begin to address this, but this will take time to implement and impact.

The political administration changed following the local elections in May 2019. The new Leader, Lead Member and City Director are fully committed to doing all that is needed to improve the quality of their response to vulnerable children.

Progress is beginning to be made on some issues but the pace of change is too slow. Equally importantly, the scale of change required is such that, in my view, the Council do not have the capacity or the capability currently to manage this successfully without significant additional expertise helping them focus on implementing the changes needed.

There have been many relatively recent changes in senior management, and both the DCS and AD are interim appointments. A recruitment process for a permanent DCS is underway. At this time, it is not known what the outcome will be. The corporate and political leadership of the Council understand the challenges facing the service and are fully committed to ensuring necessary improvements as quickly as possible. They have accepted that they are not able to do this on their own.

17. Options and Recommendations

At this time, I believe the Council should retain responsibility for managing children services and should be given time with substantial help, to drive the improvements forward. I do not consider that they have the necessary capacity and expertise within the service, to undertake this effectively and quickly without support, but any alternative would not deliver improvements as quickly as they are needed.

This remains a very sizeable task. In my view for all the reasons above and based on the evidence in this report, it is unlikely that the Council will be able on its own to deliver what is needed. I have considered the benefits that might be achieved from an alternative delivery model (ADM) but feel in this case, the work involved in setting up those new arrangements would inevitably detract from the urgent business of sorting out the service and system issues. In addition, I am concerned that the Council's new political arrangements would not provide the coherent support needed to support the establishment of an ADM, and would risk creating an environment of disagreement and distrust between the parties, which would be difficult and time consuming to address.

The following table considers the options and addresses the Secretary of State's question on alternative future delivery arrangements.

Option	Benefits and risks
1. Council supported by an Improvement Advisor to drive improvement	Not sufficient to deal with the widespread service and culture change needed, given the limited knowledge and drive in the Council.
2. Council supported by one or more Partner in Practice (PIP) good authority	Insufficient leadership in the Council to provide necessary vision and direction, to ensure sufficient drive and ability to embed changes
3. Formal partnership with a Partner in Practice local authority, which will provide executive leadership, and can bring additional expertise and capacity. To be supplemented by continued oversight from the Commissioner, input from the Regional Improvement Alliance and immediate frontline support from another PIP	A formal partnership will provide a framework that is clear to the Council, that can be monitored and hold all to account. It will give Stoke the vision for and leadership of children's services that is needed at this time, and the necessary additional capacity. It will need to be sufficiently wide ranging, and in place for long enough to ensure long term sustainability.
4. Formal partnership with a Partner in Practice local authority to include a shared DCS. To be supplemented by continued oversight from the Commissioner, input from the Regional Improvement Alliance and immediate frontline support from	This option will not provide sufficient leadership capacity in such a complex environment. A dedicated DCS is needed to provide system wide leadership to drive forward the operational improvement activity, whilst influencing corporately, and within the wider partnership. At this time, this is an extremely challenging role, and will require considerable experience and

another PIP	expertise, as well as capacity and support.
5. Creation of an alternative delivery model	Cost of transition in terms of time and resources plus loss of momentum on improving service, and risk of losing some staff at a time of uncertainty. Will probably be complicated by the different views of Council coalition members and will likely result in a delay in much needed rapid improvement.

During the period of the review I have considered with the DFE and with the Council how support for option 3 might be secured. At this stage it has not been possible to secure an agreement for this level of support. I have therefore concluded that it would be sensible to allow a 3-month period, to put in place immediate additional capacity and capability while longer term support arrangements are finalised. This will also allow for recruitment to the key leadership posts of City Director and DCS to be concluded.

Essex Council were initially approached to undertake a short review and further discussions have now taken place to establish their support over the next 3 months to focus on improving practice and performance. This will be part of a package which will include input from the regional improvement alliance as well as from Stockport, another Partner in Practice. The Council with my support is also looking to increase strategic leadership capacity during the next 3 months.

Given the complexities and challenges ahead I would also recommend that the Commissioner role should be retained to:

- Seek to put in place an agreed package of longer-term intensive support within a robust governance and accountability framework
- Provide on-going oversight and challenge through continued chairing of the Improvement Board
- To provide updates on progress to the Minister within 3 months, and thereafter at least every 6 months, to ensure that the support package is achieving necessary change.

My recommendation, therefore, is to agree a period of 3 months during which:

- A package of frontline PIP support is delivered by Essex to focus on developing restorative practice and improving performance management, alongside the support already in place from Stockport
- The Commissioner will work with the Council to strengthen the strategic leadership of the service and to support the Council to secure permanent senior leaders
- The Commissioner will undertake a review within 3 months to determine whether an LA partnership agreement can be determined, or an alternative delivery arrangement should be sought

Eleanor Brazil, Commissioner for Children’s social care in Stoke on Trent