



Department
for Education

Report of the Children's Services Improvement Adviser

Stoke on Trent Children's Social Care

February 2025

Contents

Review Methodology	3
Summary	3
Leadership and Governance	4
Partnership Working	5
Performance/Quality of Practice	5
Workforce	6
Areas for consideration	6

Review Methodology

The review draws on evidence obtained from Ofsted focused visits, reports, and data shared at Children's Improvement Boards, adviser visits to the service, regular meetings with senior leaders, and focused groups with service managers, frontline practitioners, and partners.

Summary

Stoke-on-Trent has made steady progress since the last review. Demand in the system continues to reduce, with the number of children looked after by the council being the lowest for over eighteen months, and the number of children on a child protection plan (CP) has also reduced. The quality of social work practice has not deteriorated, and the proportion of audits graded as "good" overall has improved according to the latest audit data. The service demonstrates a significant shift towards identifying unmet needs and ensuring that children and families are receiving the right support at the right time.

Local partners are engaged with and support identifying and addressing unmet needs, and there is an increasing focus on locality working.

There is a stable leadership team (apart from the Director of Children's Services - DCS) who are impacting positively on the direction of travel.

I recommend that the DFE lift the requirement for intervention.

Leadership and Governance

Strategic Leadership remains strong. Strong support from the Chief Executive and political leadership has continued. The Children's Improvement Board continues to meet regularly and has endorsed a revised and more streamlined Improvement Plan with clear and achievable priorities.

Leadership within children's social care is relatively stable, with few agency workers at either Heads of Service or Principal Manager level. Since the last review, the interim Assistant Directors have been made permanent and are starting to drive improvement. At the point of writing, the recruitment process for a permanent Director of Children's Services (DCS) is underway.

Staff report visible and approachable leadership and report that they feel that progress has been made. While recognizing that improvements still need to be made, they feel that the service is in a much better position now. Additional capacity, such as the court teams and re-unification teams, are recognized as impacting positively on the capacity of teams elsewhere in the system.

The new structure seems to have been generally well accepted with some exceptions. It seems that some Principal Managers have oversight of a high number of children, and it may be that there needs to be some further refinement in the children in care/care leaver teams.

Engaging with local partners and addressing local needs has been a key driver, with a real focus on delivering local services. The development of Trusted Local Partners is seen positively in being able to work with and address needs at an earlier stage. Social workers report that they feel they are referring more to partner agency support.

The assessment teams are in the process of moving to locality working, and while there is some uncertainty about how this might work, it creates further opportunities to develop more coherent and joined-up networks of support at a local level, bringing professionals together in a defined area.

Staff at all levels report that the service feels much more joined up. Staff report working less in silos and more collaboratively. It is clear that there is a real effort for different parts of the system to work together in a solution-focused way. I heard many examples of parts of the service offering support and in-reach work into other parts of the system.

Rightly, there has been considerable investment in initiatives and strategies to reduce demand and improve outcomes. This next period creates a real opportunity to consolidate and embed these activities and really demonstrate the positive impact they are having on children and families, rather than adding new initiatives to the portfolio. It was clear that the workforce really wants a period of stability and focus which will allow them to embed new ways of working.

The service has taken the recommendations made by the Local Government Association in its peer review of corporate parenting seriously and demonstrates a commitment to improving this function.

Partnership Working

Partner relations on the ground appear positive, with a general desire among partners to collaborate and improve outcomes for children. This represents a significant improvement since the last ILACS inspection.

However, the Local Safeguarding Partnership is in need of some rejuvenation and renewed impetus. Due to various staffing changes, there has been a somewhat stop/start approach in recent times. This needs to be addressed and the partnership must take collective responsibility and ownership for driving the safeguarding system for Stoke-on-Trent. In my discussions with key stakeholders, they expressed enthusiasm for this approach. I have recommended that:

- Designated Safeguarding Leads should meet more regularly.
- There should be a single independent scrutineer in place to hold the system accountable.
- The Business Manager role be filled permanently as soon as possible (I am aware that it has proved challenging to secure the right calibre of holder to this post, but that there is a capable interim currently in place).
- The Partnership should be adequately resourced to fulfill its responsibilities.

Performance/Quality of Practice

Performance data suggests a relatively stable position, with no major red flags. Demand has reduced, with the number of children in care and the number of child protection cases reducing over the last six months. Timeliness of assessments and Initial Child Protection Conferences remains good, although a slight dip in assessment timeliness has recently been experienced due to higher numbers of referrals. This is an area to monitor. Care Leaver data suggests that this is also an area to monitor. For example, the number of children with an updated pathway plan is declining, the number of children in Education, Employment, and Training could be improved, and while the number of children in suitable accommodation is good, social workers report that the quality of accommodation is poor for care leavers. The timeliness of Health Assessments has been a concern for the Children's Improvement Board, and this board has asked the Corporate Parenting Board to maintain oversight and challenge.

Staff report a greater focus on children receiving the right service and on permanency planning where appropriate, and report that drift and delay has reduced. That said, management oversight remains a key area of concern.

Recent data suggests that the quality of social work practice has improved, although it is still variable and not yet consistently good.

The audit process is in need of review as the service struggles to comply with its own internal procedures. This needs to be rectified promptly so that the service can be assured of its current position, and that any poor practice is addressed in real time to ensure children do not suffer harm.

Workforce

Morale seems good, with many staff reporting that it feels that things are better than they were. Practitioners report good support from their line managers and peers.

While the most recent Children's Improvement Report reported an improvement (ie a reduction) in the number of agency workers, with average caseloads now at 16.3, there is, of course, some variation across teams, and some social workers reported high caseloads. The service needs to closely monitor caseloads as increases in workload can result in less capacity for direct work with children and families. Caseloads in the Assessment Teams have increased recently, and this trend should be monitored carefully.

Previous data suggested that there was still a greater reliance on agency workers than the service would like, and this was especially the case in the assessment teams. In addition, it is widely recognized that there is a high proportion of Newly Qualified Social Workers in the workforce, meaning that the workforce is relatively inexperienced.

It will be crucial going forward that experience and expertise are retained by the service, and that the workforce strategy addresses any shortfalls in substantive post holders.

Areas for consideration

What is the LA thinking about updating the quality assurance and audit process?

How will the LA work with its partners to improve its safeguarding arrangements?

How is the workforce strategy impacting on retention of social workers and improving the skill and experience base of social workers?

How will the LA continue to assure itself that as demand reduces children remain safe?

What more might the LA do to understand the impact of early intervention on the lives of children and families?

What are the LA's plans for developing the Corporate Parenting Board?

Karen Bradshaw, Department for Education Improvement Advisor, November 2024



Department
for Education

© Crown copyright 2025

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

About this publication:

enquiries <https://www.gov.uk/contact-dfe>

download www.gov.uk/government/publications

Follow us on X: [@educationgovuk](https://twitter.com/educationgovuk)

Connect with us on Facebook: facebook.com/educationgovuk