

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



27 January 2026

Bernie Brown
Director for Children and Families
Staffordshire County Council
1 Staffordshire Place
Tipping Street
Stafford
ST16 2DH

Dear Ms Brown

Focused visit to Staffordshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Staffordshire children's services on 9 and 10 December 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale, Louise Walker and Zafer Yilkan.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door' and the response to adults in positions of trust who may pose a risk to children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, there has been a notable change in leadership both within children's social care and politically. The appointment of an already experienced director of children's services (DCS) last year has brought an ambitious vision and drive which has significantly improved front door services for children. Leaders now have a much more accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement within the front door. A new political administration recognises the need for improvement and evidences a strong commitment to strengthening services for vulnerable children in Staffordshire.

Areas for improvement from the last inspection in 2023 which related to the front door and the response to adults in positions of trust who may pose a risk to children have been addressed. Management oversight has improved significantly, but there remain pockets where it is less strong. Many of the changes made are new and there remains some fragility as a result of capacity and increased demand. Positively, very recently the council's political leaders agreed significant increased funding, which reflects their commitment to sustain and further improve services for vulnerable children. During this visit, senior managers reflected on feedback, and where necessary shared learning with staff and made changes which benefited children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?¹

- The evaluation of quality through audits. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The quality of recording of contacts taken by the council's contact centre. (enabler 2, national framework)
- Social worker caseloads, matched to experience and capacity to meet the services practice standards. (enabler 3, national framework)

Main findings

Improvements have been made through the creation of an integrated front door (IFD) which has resulted in a significant improvement since the last inspection. Management oversight is evident throughout the course of the referral decision-making process, providing clear guidance to staff on next steps and timescales. Effective processes ensure that regular checks and balances are in place to assure that timely, well-considered decisions are made in the IFD in response to contacts and referrals. This benefits vulnerable children and families.

Thresholds are well considered to inform decisions about the most proportionate response. When further information indicates that there should be a change to the priority, practitioners and managers feel confident to act on this, with clear rationale recorded at every stage.

Information gathering and sharing between partners is strong and efficient. This is supported by daily partnership meetings which enable partners to share information and respond to children's needs in a timely manner, enabling effective and timely decision-making for children.

The recording of contacts that are taken by the council's contact centre is not always sufficiently clear and can be misleading. Leaders are already aware of this and have established plans to mitigate this, which they will now be able to take forward to bring this activity within the IFD to streamline and improve the process.

Social workers routinely speak with parents to inform them about the referral and discuss it with them. Parental consent is considered, but where necessary is appropriately overridden by a manager, with an explanation recorded.

A strength in the IFD is social workers' focus on hearing from children about their experiences at the earliest opportunity whenever appropriate. Social workers creatively use other professionals who know children best to capture their views, wishes and feelings so that this information can inform decision-making.

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

When there are concerns about risk of significant harm, IFD managers action and authorise timely strategy meetings which are promptly passed to the district teams to undertake. Most strategy meetings and section 47 enquiries are timely and detailed and address the concerns effectively. Appropriate decisions are made to bring children into care when needed. Legal gateway meetings and protective measures via the courts are considered when these risks mean that children require immediate safe care.

The out-of-hours response to children and families in Staffordshire is effective, timely and child focused. The dedicated out-of-hours fostering service enables immediate placement identification for children when needed, and the emergency duty service workers support the child to move. The out-of-hours fostering service begins rehabilitation plans if appropriate and safe or starts child profile work to enable better matching at the earliest opportunity should a longer-term foster home be needed for the child.

Children's needs are well identified in assessments. Assessments are consistently written to the child, which helps to reflect their experiences and story. Most are holistic, but a minority do not provide sufficient understanding of the families' wider lived experience and support network within the community.

When children's needs or the assessment of risk changes, practitioners are responsive to individual needs. This ensures a proportionate service and families are not subject to statutory intervention when they do not need to be. It is positive that helpful support and services for families are offered during the assessment process, meaning children are not left waiting for the assessment to be completed. For many families, this prompt intervention makes a positive difference at a time when they are receptive to accepting support.

Management oversight of frontline assessment practice varies. Most is undertaken to a high standard, with regular reflective supervision of work which provides an informative summary, evaluative discussion and helpful timely actions which make it clear to the social worker what needs to be done. This enables assessments to proceed in a timely manner. A small proportion of management oversight is less strong. It is too brief and does not provide sufficient guidance to social workers to progress their work with children and families.

Social workers are committed and skilled at developing trusting relationships with both parents and children. However, higher caseloads impact on their ability to tailor the frequency of visits to children. Engagement and direct work with children and families while assessments are completed is evident. Workers build a strong rapport with both caring and absent parents to understand their experiences and concerns. This work is used very effectively in the assessment and planning of interventions.

Neglect, sexual abuse and domestic abuse are appropriately identified and responded to during the completion of assessments, with immediate safety planning

initiated. Parents are encouraged to apply for Clare's Law for further information from the police when there are concerns about the previous history of violence or abuse a new partner might have perpetrated to prevent risk to children. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences are used effectively to share information and to contribute to assessments. Caring parents are well supported to make informed decisions to safely care for their children. Absent fathers are well engaged with and parenting sessions undertaken to assist their understanding of concerns. Family group conferences are used effectively to encourage wider support within their family network for some families.

When potential risks are identified for children before their birth, assessments are usually undertaken which capture the concerns and enable parents to begin to reflect on why professionals are worried. Assessments are partnership based with input from other professionals, and families are encouraged to take up support services to help them parent well.

The effectiveness of the local authority designated officer service to respond to concerns about adults in positions of trust who may pose a risk to children has much improved since the ILACS inspection in 2023. Leaders know that information to raise awareness remains an area for development.

Changes to the corporate culture have strengthened the effectiveness of oversight by senior leaders and managers. The DCS, lead member and chief executive are highly ambitious for children. Leaders are now sighted on what is working well and what needs to change or improve and hold senior managers to account when things are not right for children.

Since starting last year, the DCS has brought in external expertise when needed to independently evaluate aspects of the service. Quality assurance has been extensively undertaken before progressing with changes, which include a restructure and new leadership team. These changes remain fairly new, and there is a realistic understanding on the part of leaders of the challenges which remain. Continued vulnerability remains particularly as a result of increased demand and high workloads, principally in the duty hubs.

Improvements achieved through the creation of the IFD have addressed concerns highlighted at the last inspection. Management oversight in the front door has been enhanced both through increased capacity and a successful implementation of the new practice standards and thresholds. Generally, management oversight and guidance have improved, but there remain some inconsistencies in the quality of management oversight, in part due to high workloads.

Strategic partnerships and relationships with partners have been strengthened. This is enabling leaders to make changes, but also to hold partners to account more effectively. This has helped to develop a shared understanding of what is needed and to resolve issues which presented barriers, such as multi-agency triage

responsibilities and the more proactive involvement of partners in the IFD. Leaders know there is more to do in relation to early help and have plans which they are starting to take forward with partners.

A revised quality assurance framework to strengthen understanding of practice quality has been implemented, which corroborates information from audits and learning from child safeguarding practice and local reviews. Performance improvement and quality assurance boards and forums have been established to provide rigour and address areas for improvement. Senior managers have an accurate understanding of practice across the service but are aware that overoptimism within audit evaluations has led to missed opportunities to improve practice. This is due to processes being identified in audits as completed which do not meet new practice standards. Senior managers acknowledge the need to increase moderation alongside clarity of expectations aligned with grading.

Staff are consistently positive about the learning offer and use this learning to improve their practice. Children and their families are benefiting from this improved child-centred approach, including the commitment to hear children's voices so that their experiences and views inform assessments and decisions.

Leaders know that workloads for some social workers are too high. Some new social workers hold work whose complexity exceeds their level of experience and skill. Staff are positive about working for Staffordshire. Staff, including those from the global majority, feel valued, and many have worked for Staffordshire Council for years, bringing continuity. Workers described a visible and approachable leadership team which has kept workers informed about all the changes. This has meant frontline staff have felt included in the changes and can see many benefits. Staff are positive about the changes made and many have expressed feeling safer in their practice as social workers.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector