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Majella McCarthy
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms McCarthy

Focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees children's services on 18 and 19 September 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were lead inspector Ceri Evans and team inspector Monique Lindsay.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children. They also looked at the impact of leaders on social work practice in their area of the service.

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

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in March 2023, when the experiences and progress of children in care was judged as requires improvement to be good, the quality and impact of social work practice for older children in care, including disabled children, have started to improve.

Most children benefit from considered care planning decisions. The majority of children live in stable homes that meet their individual needs well.

The new senior leadership team knows the service well and has an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development of services for older children in care. Leaders have clear commissioning priorities, closely aligned with their sufficiency strategy, in recognition of the need to enhance the choice of placements for older children. Leaders are proactive and work collaboratively with partner agencies to develop solutions to increasing placement sufficiency in Stockton.

Frontline management oversight in this area of practice is improving but is not yet strong enough or consistent throughout. Equally, the quality of supervision is

inconsistent. In the main, supervision records are a summary of events rather than a reflection on practice. This means that management oversight and supervision does not always challenge and prevent drift for all older children effectively.

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

- The quality and frequency of social work supervision, including management oversight of older children's progress and experiences.

Main findings

Most older children in care in Stockton benefit from social workers who build positive relationships with them and understand their needs and wishes well. However, there are some children who have experienced a number of changes in social worker, which has hindered their ability to form positive relationships. It is clear that social workers are persistent in their efforts to re-engage children and rebuild these relationships.

Some children benefit from direct work which is appropriately adapted to their age. This work helps them to explore their experiences and journey through care. The consistency and quality of this direct work is not always well evidenced in case records. This makes it difficult to see how meaningful the engagement is with some children and how they have been supported to understand their experiences.

Older children come into care when it is assessed as being right for them. Rates of entries into care have started to reduce overall. Every effort is made to support children to remain with their families when this is safe and in the child's best interests. If this is not possible, appropriate alternative homes are identified and most children are matched to homes based on assessed need. For a small number of older children, the lack of suitable homes has driven the decisions made about where they should live. Leaders know that there is more to do to tackle sufficiency challenges and they have started to address the actions set out in their sufficiency strategy.

A small number of children aged 16 and 17 are placed in supported accommodation settings. This type of provision is used based on an assessment of the children's needs and independence skills. Robust commissioning arrangements are in place to ensure the suitability of these settings. Leaders ensure that they are using providers who are registered or in the process of registering with Ofsted.

Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are provided with information about their right to come into care. They receive a responsive service and their needs are promptly addressed, resulting in children being provided with accommodation in line with their needs.

When registered placements cannot be found for children, unregistered homes are used. Currently, a small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. Senior leaders and managers have appropriate oversight of these arrangements. Leaders ensure that these children are visited regularly and move on to appropriate regulated homes quickly. When suitable to do so, leaders work closely with providers to progress registration with Ofsted.

The vast majority of older children, including disabled children, live in or close to their own communities. Most live in homes which meet their needs well. A full range of placement options are considered for older children, including long-term fostering, children's homes and kinship care. Most children are settled where they are living and do not experience unnecessary moves. This means that children are able to develop secure relationships with their carers, with a solid local support network around them.

Disabled children live in stable homes that meet their assessed needs well. They are supported by skilled social workers who understand their risks, needs and vulnerabilities. Social workers use children's preferred communication methods to understand their situations. This helps to ensure that the child's voice is clearly captured in plans and that they have a purposeful say on what is important to them.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children aged 14 and over are appropriately cared for and helped to access accommodation that meets their individual needs. Social workers understand the varied needs of this cohort of children. They are creative in exploring different ways to engage these often traumatised children to help them understand and express their feelings.

Assessments of children's needs are timely and thorough. The child's voice is captured in these records in varying levels of detail. While assessments are updated regularly, these do not consistently translate into up-to-date care plans for some children. In addition, a lack of managerial oversight and challenge has contributed to some drift and delay in progressing children's plans in a timely manner.

Children in care review meetings are timely. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) keep in touch with older children between reviews and encourage them to contribute to their plans. For a small, but significant number of children, IRO challenge is not well evidenced. Decisions are made for older children without independent scrutiny, meaning that some children have experienced placement moves without IRO challenge and oversight. IRO challenge about the quality of children's plans, or about matters of drift and delay, is not always clear in children's records. The impact of this challenge is not always evident or effective.

IRO capacity is a challenge, with many holding very high caseloads. The lack of capacity is contributing to their inability to consistently challenge and support practice improvement. Leaders are actively addressing this matter.

Permanence planning is not effective for all older children. Only a small number of children leave care via special guardianship arrangements and this area of practice is underdeveloped. Leaders recognise that there is much more to do to strengthen special guardianship arrangements so more children benefit from the stability it provides.

The management oversight of those older children who return to live with their parents under a care order is not consistent for all children. For some of these children, their care orders are not revoked in a timely way, which means that they continue to have involvement from children's social care when it is no longer needed.

As a corporate parent, the local authority is showing more ambition and determination to secure the best outcomes for older children. Improved strategic partnership arrangements and effective multi-agency working mean that children can access a variety of services to meet their individual needs. Stockton's corporate parenting strategy has been strengthened since the last inspection, but leaders also recognise that there is much more to do to ensure older children are provided with opportunities to share their views in the development of its services.

The director of children's services is an experienced leader with a real focus on what matters most for children. She, alongside the chief executive and the senior leadership team, knows the service well and what areas need to improve.

The council's self-evaluation provides a realistic picture of its strengths and areas that require further focus. Some developments have already been delivered or are being progressed. This includes increasing the sufficiency of homes for children in care, recruitment of carers, and enhancing the development offer to staff. Overall, there is a real determination among leaders to improve the quality of support provided to children in their care and their staff.

Social workers spoken with during the visit said that they like working in Stockton, and that they feel well supported by their managers and colleagues. Social workers recognise the number of changes in leadership since the last inspection, which did bring about a period of uncertainty. However, many told inspectors that things have moved on considerably and there is a sense of enthusiasm for the way in which leaders are reshaping services for older children in care.

Social workers regularly access a range of development activities and training events. Some were able to describe to inspectors how these programmes have helped to develop their practice with older children.

There are some workload pressures for social workers. Some workers told inspectors that their caseloads were too high. The impact of high caseloads is impacting on social workers' ability to keep children's records up to date.

While social workers report receiving regular and helpful supervision, this is not reflected in case records. Most supervision records lack depth of analysis and offer little reflection. Furthermore, they do not always pick up gaps in social workers' recording or delays to case progression. Therefore, for a small number of children, management decisions to adjust interventions are not made quickly enough.

The quality assurance framework includes a programme of collaborative audit, data scrutiny and thematic audits. Audits are undertaken by staff from various positions within the organisation. This helps to strengthen the line of sight to the quality of practice for children and their families. Most of the children's case audits seen by inspectors were child-focused and identified areas of strength and areas for improvement in practice. The absence of feedback from children, their parents or carers means that the audit process is not as enriched as it could be.

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

Yours sincerely

Ceri Evans
His Majesty's Inspector