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27 January 2026

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Dear Majella

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

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees children's services on 9 and 10 December 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were lead inspector Sophie Wales and team inspectors Sally Sinclair and Mark Scanlon.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's practice once a decision has been made to enter child protection enquiries and practice for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. They also looked at the impact of leaders on social work practice in this area of the service.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2023, when the experiences of children in need of help and protection were judged to require improvement to be good, the quality and impact of social work practice within the scope of this visit have strengthened.

Social workers complete timely and well-written social work assessments and plans, although the approach to neglect is variable and sometimes lacks sufficient professional curiosity. Inconsistent approach to neglect means that social workers do not always have a clearly identified structure or purpose to their work.

Direct work mostly ensures that children's voices inform decisions and plans for them. Well-applied threshold decisions ensure that children enter statutory child protection processes at the right time.

Through comprehensive quality assurance and performance information, leaders know themselves well and have an accurate assessment of the quality of practice, including areas of progress.

An effective workforce strategy, where the recruitment and retention of social workers and leaders is a key priority, means children are benefiting from lasting relationships with practitioners who know them well. The quality and impact of supervision is inconsistent. While some supervision promotes reflection and consideration of children's lived experiences, social workers are not always provided with the clarity needed to assist and guide them in their decision-making and planning.

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

- The quality of supervision to ensure it is sufficiently reflective, with actions and timescales that are recorded and tracked to minimise the potential for drift and delay for children. (enabler 3, national framework)
- The identification and response to neglect. (outcome 3, national framework)

Main findings

Children's records are mostly comprehensive and written using positive, caring language and reflect the authority's systemic and relational approach to practice. Records set out children's strengths and achievements.

When children's needs escalate, child protection enquiries are timely, with individualised safety plans in place that ensure children are appropriately safeguarded while enquiries are completed. Children's concerns and worries are listened to and accounted for. Children are quickly supported to build relationships with adults they can trust.

Family group conferencing and the use of family network meetings are increasingly used in Stockton. This means that children and parents can be better supported by their wider family and others who know and care about them.

Social work assessments are mostly detailed and analytical, and provide clear evaluations of risk and protective factors. Most assessments demonstrate professional curiosity and articulate a clear, well-developed understanding of children's vulnerabilities. Social workers use a wide range of information sources to inform their assessment outcomes. Stronger examples of assessments are informed by views of children gained through relationship-based direct work.

Strong direct work ensures that children's voices inform decisions and plans for them. Social workers use an array of tools to gather younger children's voices. Age-appropriate tools are used to gather older children's views in the adolescent teams but are less consistently applied across assessment and children and family teams.

Child in need practice is purposeful and is proportionate to levels of risk and harm. Child in need meetings are well attended by partner agencies. When children are subject to child in need plans for longer periods of time, this is in children's best interests. When this occurs, practice is subject to regular review. Conversations with parents and wider family are transparent about the need for extended social work engagement.

Children enter child protection processes appropriately, with a clearly recorded rationale and threshold. When initial child protection conferences do not progress with a plan, decisions not to progress with a multi-agency child protection plan are proportionate and well evidenced.

Child protection plans are mostly written in an accessible way, in language that is simple and clear. This helps parents and wider families to understand what is needed by them to reduce risk to their children. While child protection plans set out the actions the local authority will take if progress is not made for children, these are too generic to be sufficiently impactful for parents.

When child protection conference chairs record their views on children's records, this mostly provides a clear account of progress against the child protection plan. Child protection conference chairs encourage full participation from partner agencies and family members. This ensures a full range of views and opinions and contributes to the sharing of relevant information and updates.

Visits to children by social workers are purposeful. Children are seen alone when it is appropriate to do so, and their views and wishes are gathered using methods proportionate to their age.

Management oversight and direction is mostly recorded in children's records, and means social workers are clear about the social work task in hand. When this is not sufficiently recorded, leaders are unable to track and monitor agreed actions.

The response to neglect is variable. Practice mainly focuses on the presenting issue and actions are often task orientated; there is less curiosity on the part of social workers in understanding the underlying reasons for children's neglectful care. Tools for assessing neglect are not consistently used.

The safeguarding response for children at risk of physical harm is largely effective. Social workers also demonstrate a clear awareness of risks arising from domestic abuse and extra-familial harm. When harm is identified, appropriate child protection

planning actions are taken to protect children, with proactive safety planning in place to reduce the likelihood of further harm.

Leaders provide clear strategic direction and oversight across the service and demonstrate an ambition for consistently high quality practice. Managers and frontline practitioners understand and can articulate leaders' vision for service improvements. Social workers spoken to during the visit are energised and enthused about the positive culture change that leaders are bringing. There is strong political support for children's services.

Leaders know they need to maintain a focus on recent progress made. Practice improvement in the overall quality of social work assessments and plans and the impact of interventions is starting to embed and gain traction; inspectors saw where more recent work was stronger.

The authority's self-evaluation sets out detailed plans for ongoing service improvement and reflects an accurate picture of current practice within the scope of this visit. A comprehensive quality assurance and performance framework is providing leaders with a strengthened line of sight into practice. As a result, leaders know the strengths and areas for development in this practice area. Children's services performance is closely overseen by leaders and managers at all levels. The authority and children's partnership use a wide range of audit activity to inform their learning and development and develop good practice. The local authority understands that it has more to do to consistently and systematically seek feedback from children, parents and partner agencies. The local authority is continuing to strengthen its moderation of audit activity to ensure consistency of practice.

Social workers speak highly of working in Stockton. They describe a visible and approachable leadership team, and feel seen and cared about, reinforcing the strong relational culture in the service. The leadership team prioritises staff wellbeing, providing workers with direct access to a clinical psychology service and same day GP appointments. This is leading to an increase in permanently recruited social workers and significant reduction in agency workers. Some agency workers are converting to permanent roles, attributing this to the positive changes they are observing and development opportunities being created.

The learning academy is well regarded by social workers. Social workers who access the academy benefit from an established learning culture where development is expected and supported at all levels. Structured induction for newly qualified workers and the effective integration of students show a commitment to building confidence and capability early on. Importantly, staff progression pathways demonstrate leaders' success in growing talent internally. Systemic and management training is creating a culture of reflective, evidence-based practice. Social workers access an extensive range of training and development opportunities, including virtual reality domestic abuse training and modular systemic training. International social workers are particularly well supported by the learning academy.

Supervision practice is variable. Some practice is reflective and considered, while other practice is more task orientated and directive. Insufficient reflection is given to the formulation of meaningful plans and the development of purposeful strategies. Supervision actions are not consistently measured, timebound or sufficiently reviewed. This means actions for children are not always monitored. Leaders are aware of this and have plans to develop this further to bring a more consistent approach for workers.

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

Yours sincerely

Sophie Wales
His Majesty's Inspector