

TITLE OF REPORT: Ofsted Focused Visit – Front Door of Children’s Services

REPORT OF: Strategic Director, Children Adults and Families

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide information on the outcome of the visit carried out by Ofsted as part of the new ILAC (Inspections of Local Authority Children’s Services). Ofsted undertook an on-site, focused visit of Gateshead’s Children’s Services on 22-23rd September 2021 to evaluate the quality of help and protection provided to vulnerable children and their families in the ‘front door’ integrated referral team (IRT) and in the assessment and intervention service (A&I).
2. The team of Her Majesty’s Inspectors met with social workers and their managers and looked in detail at children’s records. In addition, inspectors appraised the quality and impact of the local authority’s performance management and audit arrangements.
3. Full report, as well as the presentation delivered to Ofsted on the first day of the inspection can be found attached at Appendix 1.

Background

4. In January 2018 Ofsted published a new inspection framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers. The new framework judges the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:
 - To help and protect children.
 - The experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those who return home.
 - The arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption.
 - The experience and progress of care leavers.

Focused Visits

5. Focused visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme or the experiences of a cohort of children.

6. Inspectors will not make graded judgements (inadequate, requires improvement, good or outstanding). Nor will they indicate what the grade may have been if the visit had been a short or standard inspection. The outcome will be findings about strengths and areas for improvement, reported in a letter.
7. Where inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will identify areas for priority action.
8. An area for priority action is either:
 - An area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm.

Or

 - Unnecessary delay in identifying permanent solutions for children in care that results in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

9. Inspectors will use findings from focused visits when planning their next short or standard inspection, the evidence from a focused visit will not be used as primary evidence but may enable inspectors to target their evidence gathering more effectively.
10. Gateshead's Children's Services was last inspected in May 2019 when the services provided to children were judged to be consistently, and strongly, good in all areas of the work.

In the News

11. The following extract is taken from an article in the Community Care publication 27th October 2021 praising Gateshead for the quality of services delivered:

<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2021/10/27/inadequate-councils-make-progress-in-latest-ofsted-visits/>

Strong praise for North East authority:

Meanwhile, in a report today, Ofsted strongly praised good-rated Gateshead following a visit that focused on services at the front door.

Inspectors said the North East authority's "highly skilled, committed and caring social workers" and managers provided "sensitive, innovative, child-centred help and protection" to children.

Most assessments were “comprehensive and analytical”, clearly reflecting the child’s voice and experiences, while there was a “resolute focus” on understanding the impact of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental ill-health and neglect.

This was backed up by “rigorous” performance management and “strong, effective and ambitious senior leadership” under director of children’s services Caroline O’Neill.

Summary of the Ofsted Visit Sept 2021:

12. *‘Gateshead’s highly skilled, committed and caring social workers and their managers in the front door teams provide sensitive, innovative child-centred help and protection to most children seen during the visit. Continuously strong, ambitious and effective senior leadership has resulted in sustained improvements. The well-respected and experienced director of children’s services (DCS), together with her senior team, has created a culture where doing the right thing to help children and their families is embedded across teams.*

Closely aligned, mature professional partnerships work together effectively to safeguard children from harm. Thresholds are understood well and scrutinised frequently. There is consistent and commendable evidence of continuous innovation and improvement during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Senior leaders are fittingly proud of their staff’s commitment and determination throughout this period to see vulnerable children and their families face to face. Staff report that they feel valued in their work and professional development and that their personal well-being is prioritised.

Performance management is effective. Leaders are intending to take action to strengthen their audit function by including the views of children and parents. Managers’ inconsistent evaluation in supervision and lack of direction around alternative ways of working, along with an absence of contingency planning, contribute to delay for a small number of children.’

13. Ofsted was very complimentary about Gateshead’s ability to continue to innovate under unprecedented demand and pressure even during a global pandemic:

despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, a strong culture of outward-looking, continuous learning and accountability meant that Gateshead continued to innovate, and to take forward the new initiatives.’

14. Ofsted identified the following areas for improvement:

- The quality and impact of supervision and contingency planning for children in need.
- The routine inclusion of the views of children and their families in audits.

When will Gateshead receive a full, graded Ofsted inspection of Children's Services?

15. According to Ofsted there is no fixed cycle or end date for the programme of re-inspections. Under the current ILACS inspection schedule, Ofsted uses the intelligence and information they have to inform discussions about when and how best to inspect each local authority.

16. Ofsted has stated:

'There will be times when concerns arise about a local authority. The regional director will decide whether to undertake an inspection (standard or short inspection) at which Ofsted will make a graded judgement, or whether a focused visit would be more appropriate.'

17. In most cases, if the next standard or short inspection is not due, Ofsted determine to carry out a focused visit. This is intended to give the local authority and Ofsted the opportunity to identify what is going well and what needs to improve before the next judgement inspection happens.

18. Ofsted says this approach aims to support improvement while still holding the local authority to account in meeting their legal responsibilities to children in need of help, protection and care.

19. Ofsted will inspect local authorities based on the intelligence they have about them and the most recent Ofsted judgement, which for Gateshead was 'good'. The timing of standard and short inspections will usually be within six months before or after the three-year anniversary.

20. The Covid pandemic has impacted on the normal cycle of inspections so it is anticipated that Gateshead will receive a full re-inspection in 2022 or 2023. A significant advantage of receiving a very positive focused visit is that Ofsted will not be in any hurry to re-inspect Gateshead. However, a change of DCS will be taken into account in determining the timing of the next inspection.

Recommendations

21. It is recommended that Corporate Parenting Board:

- Notes the outcome of the Ofsted visit September 2021 and considers the implications for children in Gateshead

- Receives a post Ofsted action plan so it can monitor progress against the areas Ofsted identified for improvement.

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