

**07 March 2024**

**TITLE OF REPORT:** Journey to Excellence...The story so far...

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Services

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## **SUMMARY**

This report will provide Members with an overview and progress update in relation to areas identified for improvement from inspection activity and quality assurance work and to highlight our key areas of focus for improvement following our own annual self assessment.

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### **Purpose of Report**

1. This report provides members with an overview and progress update in relation to the areas identified for development from inspection activity by Ofsted, specifically our Focussed Visit which took place in September 2021 and short ILACs inspection which took place in April 2019. The report will detail how we have taken learning from compliments, complaints, peer reviews, thematic and case file audits to improve practice and highlight key areas for priority focus in 2024-25 .

### **Background**

2. Children's Services, as part of Ofsted's framework for inspecting local authority children services (ILACS), are required to engage in a variety of Joint Area Targeted, Thematic and Focussed Visit inspections, as well as an ILACs (Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services) which should take place every 3 years.
3. The findings of our last two inspections have been positive in relation to the services we are providing to children and families.
4. In our short ILACs inspection in 2019 Children's Services was judged an overall **Good**, with inspectors concluding:

*"Children and families in Gateshead receive a good-quality service. There is good practice within most areas of the service, which has a demonstrably positive impact on improving children and family's circumstances".*

(<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50083971> - page 1)

5. In our Focussed Visit in September 2021, Ofsted found we continue to provide a good service, and that had in fact improved upon since their previous contact, with the report stating:

*“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”.*

<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50171105> - page 2)

6. While both inspections were positive about the services we are providing, as a Council we want to do more and aspire to be an Outstanding Children’s Services provider, ensuring that our children and families receive the best services and outcomes. Both inspections identified some areas of improvement and further work needed to achieve this ambition.
7. As part of the inspection cycle local authorities are required to produce an Annual Self-Assessment which identifies areas of progress and areas for further improvement and this forms the basis of our updated improvement plan and areas for development as well as the basis of our annual conversations with Ofsted which is a key part of the assurance process with the regulator.

### **What we know so far...**

8. To build on the Ofsted reported good quality practice in Gateshead we have developed a robust Quality Assurance Framework which includes an annual schedule for auditing and learning that is used to help us benchmark ourselves against the Ofsted Framework and ensure that our services not only improve but do not decline.
9. Learning from audits is shared and implemented through a variety of forums including our Quality Improvement Board, chaired by the Director of Children’s Services, the Strategic Quality Assurance Group, chaired by the Deputy Strategic Director for Children’s Social Care and Early Help and, monthly performance and practice clinics held with team managers across all frontline teams.
10. In June 2023 an external Consultancy team conducted a review of our audit framework, and our case file audits were moderated. A number of our audits reviewed included Children in Need, Child Protection, Children in Care and a particular focus on our Children’s Care plans. The findings of this work confirmed that our audit work is of good quality and on the whole our audits findings were consistent with the external audit findings. We will continue to work on strengthening the quality of our assurance work and have invited the audit team to come back to Gateshead in the summer 2024 to conduct training with our auditors and further review the quality of our audits.
11. Another mechanism for learning is through complaints and compliments received from the families we work with. This information is shared routinely with our workforce and learning is taken forward through the various governance groups outlined. Reports are routinely provided to Overview and Scrutiny committees and the 2022/23 annual complaints and compliments report was shared in

September 2023. In summary, in 2022/23 we saw a reduction in stage 1 complaints and formal contacts received citing dissatisfaction about Children's Services and positively, 63% of all contacts relating to compliments.

12. Alongside our internal assurance activity, our safeguarding partnership board also plays an active role in supporting Children Services to develop and learn from audits. The Multi-Agency audits completed have included themes such as Domestic abuse, Child Protection Conferences and SEND. All learning is shared across the partnership and the delivery of actions and recommendations tracked through the safeguarding Partnership sub-groups.

13. Ofsted ILACs inspection are undertaken every 3 years. Given that Gateshead's last inspection was held in April 2019, the next ILACs inspection is overdue and expected imminently.

In our previous two inspections, in summary we were told we need to improve and further develop the following.

### **Short Inspection 2019 & Focused Visit 2021**

- (i) Managers' and independent reviewing officers' challenge to the quality of social work practice, including more effective use of supervision when practice falls short.
- (ii) The quality and focus of written plans to ensure that they are specific and targeted to meet the needs of individual children, to include pathway plans that are co-produced with young people to address all risks, and life-story work to help all children in care understand their histories.
- (iii) The pace of change in relation to, and the quality of services for, disabled children.
- (iv) Access to services for those children in care who live out of the borough, including the timely return of personal education plans from schools outside of the borough.
- (v) The quality and impact of supervision and contingency planning for children in need.
- (vi) The routine inclusion of the views of children and their families in audits.

14. In relation to these areas, we have undertaken the following -

- (i)(v) Challenge of social work practice and quality and impact of supervision and contingency planning for children in need.

Our supervision policy document which underpins the way in which supervision should be delivered has been revised and relaunched. An external consultant has delivered extensive training and workshops with all managers and Independent

Reviewing Officer to support with the improvement of supervision. Our audits tell us that this area of practice has improved.

We have introduced a Child In Need scrutiny panel to review all children's Child In Need plans and ensure that the work required to support these families is timely and meeting need. Initial findings indicate that we have robust plans for children and continually ensure that contingencies are in place to avoid drift and delay.

(ii) Quality of plans and life story work

Our workforce development training plan has been reviewed and there has been a re-emphasis on ensuring that we have quality plans for children. A new training programme has been delivered to staff and our audits tell us that this work has improved, and we are now seeing SMART plans which detail the support and work required to ensure that children's needs are being addressed.

In relation to life story work, over the past 24 months we have undertaken extensive work to reinstate the importance of this work with practitioners. We have worked in collaboration with Blue Cabin, an independent provider to complete and deliver life story work to our children and we have revised policies. We now have a number of dedicated workers who are life story work champions and support our workforce to complete this work. Our work in this area is a continued priority.

(iii) The pace of change in relation to, and the quality of services for, disabled children.

In 2019 there were some concerns about the stability of the Disabled Children's team and the quality of work. A robust improvement plan has been implemented and signed off with all actions completed following the 2019 ILACs inspection.

Our audits tell us that the quality of the work being undertaken by our Children with Disabilities team is of good quality. We have an experienced manager in post who joined after the 2019 inspection, bringing a wealth of experience which has been of benefit to the service. We know that there are a small number of children's assessments require updates which will be completed by March 2024. Recently, caseloads are higher in the team than we would want due to staff progressing into senior posts. Recruitment is underway and we are confident that appointments will be achieved. Caseloads are robustly reviewed and there is robust management oversight in place to ensure that staff are supported, and all children plans are progressed.

(v) Access to services for those children in care who live out of the borough, including the timely return of personal education plans from schools outside of the borough.

Since our last inspection there has been a review of the virtual school and a restructure including the appointment of a new Virtual Head. A key priority was to ensure clarity of caseloads for the Virtual School team and that there was a single point of contact for schools, social workers, Team Managers, IROs and

carers. The restructure of the Virtual School team has enabled an increase in capacity by 2 FTEs; a Deputy Head has been appointed and clear leadership across all phases including complex SEND and CIOC who live outside of the Borough has been established. New electronic case file system for PEP's has been embedded. Recruitment for the new posts is currently underway and is expected to be concluded in March 2024. These significant changes have supported a more intensive offer to our children who live out of borough and data tells us that 96% of our children in out of borough placements have a Personal Education Plan. To further ensure a robust oversight of children living out of borough, these children are in receipt of visits from Independent Reviewing Officers.

(vi) The routine inclusion of the views of children and their families in audits.

Our quality assurance framework has been refreshed and to enhance the quality and learning from our audits we now routinely seek to gather family feedback. At times this can be a challenge when families do not wish to engage in the process. Some of the feedback we received in our Qu 3 audits include:

*“Everything is better... the social worker is helping... everything was going OK and has no problems with social services involvement. ‘I am happy with the support at the moment’ and when asked if she felt anything could be improved by the social worker she said no”.*

*“Child was asked on a scale of 0 – 10 (where 0 is Social Worker is rubbish and 10 is she is really good) where would he put his SW, child said a 10 and when asked why, he said she listens to him.*

*“Mam said SW ‘does nothing but help us’ if I need her, I can ring or text her, child loves her”.*

## **15. Priorities for 2023/2024**

Having taken the learning from both previous Ofsted inspections we have extended our plans to strengthen practice and develop a Journey to Excellence plan which identifies 8 key areas of improvement that the service is currently working on. Progress against each area is outlined:

### **15. Expand and strengthen our Early Help Prevention**

Our ambition is to expand and strengthen the Early Help prevention offer to all children and young people across the Gateshead system to ensure it is rooted in wider locality working and schools.

To achieve this we have; developed 6 family hubs across the borough which offer a range of support services to families in their local communities, revised and relaunched a new Early Help assessment framework, developed a multi-disciplinary team approach to supporting early help conversations with families at the earliest opportunity when they are in need of support and we are in the process of establishing a wider youth offer.

## 16. Strengthen co-production and delivery of services for children with SEND and EHCP

Through the continued strengthening of co-production and delivery of services for children with SEND and an EHCP and our collaborative work with parents, carers and young people; including improvement in the experiences of transitions for young people, we are ensuring that our families shape and redesign the services they are in receipt of. We have invested in and recruited to a new Designated Social Care Officer role which is supporting this work in children's social care. This system wide work is extensive and governed through the strengthened SEND board which is chaired by the Director of Children Services.

## 17. Develop a refreshed approach to supporting vulnerable adolescents.

Whilst we have had a strong offer to our families with young adolescents we have continued to strengthen and develop our approach. This work includes supporting vulnerable adolescents; those who are missing from home and care; those at risk of harm outside the home; those who are on the edge of care and experiencing complex mental health issues. Services have been reviewed and redesigned to ensure they are fully integrated under one new senior leader. We have a strong multi agency offer which is enhanced through the support of the new Trusting Hands service which includes psychologists and speech therapists and is supporting a trauma informed approach to this work.

Through a number of reviews including the partnership MSET review (multi safeguarding exploitation team) and thematic audits in relation to our missing children and the realignment of services, we have improved the quality of services for children, reduced the number of changes of lead professional, improved relational practice, ensure a robust edge of care offer for teenagers, and reduced risk of harm outside the home.

## 18. Support children and young people on the edge of care

Supporting our children and young people on the edge of care to remain at home and when we do need to care for them, to support a return home to birth family or connected carers at the earliest opportunity when it is safe to do so, is a high priority for us.

We have reviewed our offer to young people who are at risk of any form of harm outside the home and as a result we have developed a dedicated Contextual Safeguarding Team. This provides an assessment of need and intervention plan for every young people aged 11 + who are at risk or victims of exploitation, at risk or victim of extremism or terrorism, complex mental health or on the edge of care or homelessness due to family relationship breakdown.

A wide range of strategies have been developed in the last twelve months across the service, to safely reduce the number of new children entering care, which are

beginning to have a positive impact. These include; an intensive edge of care offer, a refreshed approach to support for new children at risk outside the home, an enhanced FGC offer, the development of a pre-birth service and the embedding of a reunification strategy.

#### 19. Strengthen our local offer for care experienced young people.

We have built on new opportunities to strengthen our local offer alongside the work of the regional Care Leaver Board, ensuring that our care leavers have opportunities to engage in education and employment and training.

Amongst many other work activities this has included a reviewed the Care Leaver App and moved to an in-house digital App which is much more intuitive and means that young people can access vital information from the Care Leaver local offer. The IT platform enables young people to seek advice on finances, employment, training, accommodation, and many other adulthood related queries. This new platform has a recite function, allowing our Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking care leavers to have a translated service and access to advice and guidance at their fingertips.

To enable our care experienced young people to be included in their local communities and maintain healthy lifestyles, as part of the local offer all care experienced young people can access a Go Leisure pass, which enables them to use local leisure facilities free of charge. They now have access to a free travel card which has enhanced their opportunities to access family, employment and leisure activities.

#### 20. Ensure we have sufficient homes and choice of homes

We have ambitious plans to increase the sufficiency of placements locally, given the increased numbers of children in our care. Working with council stakeholders and commissioned partners to deliver on the placement sufficiency strategy has remained a priority for us to ensure we have sufficient homes and choice of homes for our children and young people as well as sufficient short break provision.

We are proud to receive national recognition in the 2023 National Children and Young Peoples Awards, when two of our foster carers were awarded for contributions to improving the outcomes of children. Our foster carers are key in supporting our recruitment campaigns and have helped us develop new material to help prospective carers think about becoming foster carers.

A significant review of housing providers is underway which will ensure that we can recommission and provide sufficient high quality Ofsted registered accommodation and support all young people who required supported accommodation.

In 2023 we joined the DfE regional fostering hub initiative which was launched on 27<sup>th</sup> September and has allowed us to expand our advertising footprint with the ambition of attracting more prospective carers to register with Gateshead.

## 21. Strengthen co-production.

Extensive work is underway to continue to work with our children and young people and strengthen co production and their influence on service development and ensure that their views are consistently evident on case files. We have recruited to our second cohort of young ambassadors; these are dedicated and enthusiastic young people who were previously in our care. A workplan has been devised for this group of young adults to support with several strategic priorities.

We continue to encourage our children and young people to be part of our interview panels for new staff and participate on various innovation groups including the SEND board and Corporate Parenting Board.

## 22. Practice Model and Quality Assurance Framework

We are working hard to further embed our Practice Model, Quality Assurance Framework and improve the quality of plans for all children including robust Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) oversight.

Our current practice system has been updated and refreshed to support positive change for our families that can be sustained. The 'Narrative approach' ensures that our language is accessible and understood by our families. The approach is a strength based, solution focused approach to children's social work which draws on tools, techniques, methods, and models from strength-based, person-centred practice. Through this approach we support children, young people and families to recognise and build on their own strengths contributing and collaborating in their own plans and outcomes.

In 2024 with support from an external highly skills provider, we will be embarking on a significant work programme to further embed our restorative and relational practice model. Our audits are telling us that the quality of children's plans are improving and that IROs are more visible.

23. In preparation for inspection, we have improved performance reports which enable managers to scrutinise case work and ensure that files are routinely updated.

24. In March 2024 the Director of Children Services, Director of Education and the Deputy Strategic Director of Children's Social Care, Early Help and Specialist services will meet with Ofsted for our Annual Engagement meeting. This will be an opportunity to share with Ofsted how we think we are performing as a local authority. As part of this process a Self-Evaluation report is produced and shared with the Inspectors. This will assist in providing inspectors with an overview of our work, any areas for development and progress to date.

## Conclusion



25. In conclusion, there is a lot of good work and practice we need to celebrate across Children Social Care, Early Help and Specialist services. As a result of assurance work in 2023/2024 we are able to demonstrate process and positive outcomes for children and families. Whilst there is always further work to be done, progress to date is positive.

26. During 2024 there will be a continual focus on the priorities outlined in this report and these will be taken forward with a renewed pace in relation to our ambition to provide the very best services to children and their families to support them achieving good outcomes.

## **Recommendations**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

- Receive the report for information.

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