

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board¹

Inspection date: 23 May to 16 June 2016

Report published: 5 August 2016

Children's services in Stockton-on-Tees are good.	
1. Children who need help and protection	Good
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Requires improvement
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
3. Leadership, management and governance	Good

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

Executive summary

Services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees are good. Highly effective leadership from the director of children's services (DCS) sets clear priorities and aspirations to improve outcomes for children and young people. Inspectors have seen good evidence of sustained improvement since the last inspection. Political leaders have been responsive to budget pressures, with additional financial investment where needed, and ensure a robust level of scrutiny across children's services. The extent to which all leaders and elected members within the local authority engage with children and young people is outstanding.

The local authority knows itself very well. It is good at recognising where service capacity does not fully meet expected standards and takes effective action to address this. An extensive programme of external audit, self-assessment and thematic reviews is used to interrogate service quality and outcomes. The findings are widely reported across the partnership to ensure that strengths and weaknesses are known and understood. Regular supervision of frontline staff is one example of how senior management scrutiny has improved performance. Accurate self-assessment has identified that supervision is not yet of consistently good quality. However, social workers do feel valued and well supported. They report that senior managers are highly visible and that they are proud to work in Stockton-on-Tees.

Strong management and leadership by the council and the Stockton-on-Tees Local Safeguarding Children Board (SLSCB) have led to improved partnership engagement. A wide range of responsive services are available to children and their families in need of help and protection. Services have been reorganised to develop a stronger and more integrated approach to early help. There are many examples of high-quality work within projects across the borough. For example, an innovative family hub is available to families every weekend and provides help with a range of issues.

While children and families have access to effective early help services, this is not yet leading to a reduction in the number of children who are referred for social care support. Although contacts and referrals are robustly screened by children's social care, thresholds for access to statutory services are not yet fully understood or applied across the partnership. Senior leaders recognise that more needs to be done to support agencies to make appropriate referrals to children's social care. A new multi-agency children's hub was implemented in June 2016. This has already begun to assist professionals to signpost children and young people with a lower threshold of need to more appropriate services.

There is a highly effective approach to safeguarding and managing risk. When concerns about a child's or young person's safety are identified, robust action is taken to safeguard them. Referrals are dealt with in a timely manner, and workers are allocated cases that are appropriate to their skills and experience. While child protection enquiries and information sharing are robust, the lack of attendance by Cleveland police at strategy discussions has an impact on the quality of analysis of

risk at these meetings. Arrangements to safeguard children and young people who go missing from home or education or who are at risk of being sexually exploited are effective. However, findings from all missing from home interviews are not analysed sufficiently to inform children's individual safety plans, strategic risk management and prevention planning.

Single assessments are undertaken in children's timescales and many are informed by effective use of a theoretical social work model. Most children in need and protection plans are clear, but not all specify the intended outcomes or timescales for improvement. Support for children and young people with complex care needs and disabilities is good.

The consistently high numbers of children looked after are increasing pressure on placement sufficiency. Effective action is being taken to recruit new foster carers and develop new children's homes within the borough. However, not enough support is available to children and young people who are at risk of becoming looked after. When children and young people do become looked after, they are provided with good placements that meet their immediate need for protection. Placement stability is good. When children need legal permanence, care proceedings progress through court in a timely way. However, permanence planning is not considered soon enough for all children. Social workers and their managers lack understanding of the regulations regarding placements within families and with connected persons.

When children are identified for adoption, effective matching takes place and placements are well supported. The recruitment of adopters is not sufficiently targeted, as it is not informed by a written, detailed analysis of need. Fostering to adopt is underdeveloped. When children are unable to return to their birth family, they are not supported well to understand their life story or the reason that they became looked after.

Good arrangements are in place to maintain and improve the health and emotional needs of children looked after and care leavers. Strong, incisive leadership, and support and challenge by the virtual headteacher to schools, are helping to drive improvement in pupils' achievements and attendance. Outcomes by the end of key stages 2 and 4 for children looked after are above those of similar groups nationally, and the gaps between their achievements and those of other pupils are narrowing.

Collective actions of services that work with care leavers across the council ensure that they are well supported to develop the skills that they need to move on to independence. The council is in touch in a meaningful way with all but one care leaver. With the exception of three young people in custody and one young person who refuses to engage, all care leavers live in suitable accommodation and remain in contact with services until they are at least 21. More care leavers move on to education, employment or training, including the proportion moving on to university, than similar groups nationally.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area²

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates six children's homes. Three were judged to be good and three were judged to be outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspections. The inspection of one children's home was triggered during the inspection by concerns regarding supervision of children at the home. The outcome of the inspection was that the home was again judged to be good.
- The last inspection of the local authority's arrangements for the protection of children was in January 2013. The local authority was judged to be adequate in overall effectiveness.
- The last inspection of the local authority's services for children looked after services was in September 2010. The local authority was judged to be good in overall effectiveness.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since August 2008.
- The DCS was also responsible for adult services, in a role incorporating both the DCS and director of adult social services (DASS), until December 2015. In January 2016, the DASS part of the role ceased due to a senior management review within the local authority.
- The chair of the LSCB has been in post since April 2016.
- The local authority has joint contact and referral arrangements with Hartlepool Borough Council through the formation of a children's hub, with effect from June 2016.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 42,465 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Stockton-on-Tees. This is 21.9% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 21.6% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 17.8% (the national average is 15.6%)
 - in secondary schools is 16.2% (the national average is 13.9%).

² The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 8.4% of all children living in the area, compared with 21.5% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian and Asian British.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 6.2% (the national average is 19.4%).
 - in secondary schools is 4.7% (the national average is 15.0%).

Child protection in this area

- At 22 May 2016, 2,268 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is an increase from 1,902 at 31 March 2015.
- At 22 May 2016, 294 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is a reduction from 355 at 31 May 2015.
- At 22 May 2016, five children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. The number at 22 May 2015 was suppressed.
- Since the last inspection, six serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted, and two serious case reviews have been completed or are ongoing at the time of this inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 22 May 2016, 398 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 93.7 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 377 (88.8 per 10,000 children) at 31 May 2015.
- Of this number:
 - 132 live outside the local authority area
 - 45 live in residential children's homes, of whom 12 live out of the authority area
 - Six live in residential special schools, all of whom live out of the authority area
 - 281 live with foster families, of whom 92 live out of the authority area
 - 32 live with parents, of whom four live out of the authority area
 - Three children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 18 adoptions
 - 14 children became subject of special guardianship orders
 - 134 children ceased to be looked after, of whom nine subsequently returned to be looked after
 - six children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - one young person ceased to be looked after and is now living in a house in multiple occupation.

The casework models used in this area

- Signs of safety
- Graded care profile

Recommendations

1. Improve the quality of supervision across children's services, explicitly linking supervision to accountability, professional development and ensuring that the best possible outcomes for children are being pursued.
2. Ensure that return home interviews are offered to all children who go missing from home or care, and that each episode is analysed to inform the child's safety plan and wider strategic planning in relation to prevention and risk reduction.
3. Improve the quality and consistency of all children's and young people's plans, ensuring that the overall aim is clear, detailing the services or support that will be offered, and that reasonable timescales are set which reflect the child's needs and development.
4. The local authority should satisfy itself that all placements where children and young people are placed with connected persons and private fostering are appropriate, and that all carers are assessed under the relevant regulation.
5. Develop 'edge of care' services to respond in a flexible, family-friendly way to offer realistic alternatives to full-time residential or foster care.
6. Ensure that the care planning process for children looked after always considers adoption as a possible permanence option at the four-month review, including consideration of foster to adopt. In addition, ensure that the family-finding process begins as soon as adoption becomes the plan following a statutory review.
7. Ensure that the best quality legal advice is available to social workers and their managers to support effective and timely planning for children and young people.
8. Ensure that there are sufficient foster carers, residential placements and potential adopters to meet the needs of the children.
9. Ensure that when children are separated from their birth families, they have the opportunity to understand their past and move positively into the future through the provision of sensitive and timely life-story work.
10. Continue to challenge and monitor the attendance of Cleveland police at strategy meetings to ensure compliance with Working Together 2015. In addition, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector will act within the terms of the published information sharing protocol (agreed between all the relevant inspectorates) in sharing these findings with HMI Constabulary for it to decide what course of action is appropriate.

Summary for children and young people

- When children, young people and their families experience difficulties, there are many professionals available to provide help and support. If children and young people need protection, experienced social workers and other professionals act quickly to help to make children safe.
- Some children and young people need to be looked after away from their own home. When this happens, social workers find good homes with caring adults for young people.
- When children need to be looked after, social workers always try hard to keep brothers and sisters together, and make sure that children can still see their friends and people who are important to them. They do their best to make sure that children and young people do not have to change schools.
- Social workers make sure that the best adoptive families are found for children when they cannot return home to live with their parents.
- When children and young people are unable to return home, they need help to understand the reasons why. This does not happen soon enough, and the council needs to do much more to help children to understand their history and life experiences.
- When young people are old enough to leave care, they get good support to stay with their carers or to move when they are ready to live independently.
- Senior managers and leaders at the council want all children to do well in school. They make sure that, when they are ready, young people have the support they need to go to college, university or find a job. Senior managers also make sure that children and young people have good access to professionals who can help them to be healthy, stay safe and feel good about themselves.
- Social workers know the children and young people whom they work with very well. Senior managers and leaders at the council work very hard to make sure that they listen to children and young people, and understand what they are saying about the help that they receive. They use what children and young people tell them to make services better and to do things differently if they need to.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Good

Summary

Services to safeguard children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees are good. A wide range of responsive services are available to children and their families in need of help and protection. Services have been reorganised to develop a stronger and more integrated approach to early help. This is helping to support children and families as soon as they need it.

While children and families have access to effective early help services, this is not yet leading to a reduction in the numbers referred for social care support. Although contacts and referrals are robustly screened by children’s social care, thresholds for access to statutory services are not yet fully understood or applied. The new multi-agency children’s hub that was launched during this inspection is showing very early signs of positive impact in directing more professionals to help children, young people and their families with a lower threshold of need.

There is a highly effective approach to safeguarding and managing risk. Children and young people are protected through effective multi-agency arrangements. There are robust responses to concerns where children are exposed to domestic violence, parental substance misuse and parental mental health difficulties. Arrangements to safeguard children and young people who go missing from home or education or who are at risk of being sexually exploited are effective. When concerns about a child’s or young person’s safety are identified, robust action is taken to safeguard them. While child protection enquiries and information sharing are robust, the lack of attendance by Cleveland police at strategy discussions has an impact on the quality of analysis of risk at these meetings.

Single assessments are undertaken in children’s timescales and many have an explicit analysis of risk and protective factors, supported by effective use of a social work model. Most children in need and protection plans are clear, but not all specify the intended outcomes or timescales for improvement. While supervision of social workers is regular, it is neither sufficiently challenging nor reflective. Support for children and young people with complex care needs and disabilities is good.

Allegations of abuse, mistreatment and poor practice by professionals who work with and have contact with children are managed effectively. Children receive good support when identified as being in private fostering arrangements. However, managers and social workers are not always clear about what constitutes such an arrangement, and so cannot be sure that they are supporting the right children and their carers appropriately.

Inspection findings

11. The local authority has effectively prioritised and invested in early help support. This is having a positive impact, improving outcomes for many children. A wide range of early help support is available for families. This is coordinated and delivered via the early help team. This multi-agency team is social work-led and benefits from access to a wide range of in-house and commissioned services and a dedicated early help family support service. Supported by a partnership-wide strategic approach, the local authority has appropriate plans to enhance and develop services further.
12. There is good evidence of success in improving outcomes for children and young people identified through the 'Troubled Families' programme. Further evidence of targeted help to vulnerable families can be seen in some innovative projects around the borough, for example the Citizens Advice Bureau, providing targeted financial advice and support. This has had a positive impact on 103 families in the first quarter of 2016, preventing homelessness, managing debt and maximising income. In addition, a weekend family hub offers help and support to families with a range of issues, from relationships to childcare, budgeting and housing. The hub is in an accessible community location, and provides toys, games and internet access for children to enable parents to make full use of the services available. This creative project significantly increases the early help on offer to six days a week, with telephone support available on a Sunday.
13. During 2015–16, there has been a 43% increase in the number of early help assessments completed by partner agencies. This is directly attributable to the success of a shared objective and ambition across the partnership to provide a more integrated approach to early help. Skilled and motivated early help workers both support and challenge professionals to consider the most appropriate response to children and young people who have a lower threshold of need. Evidence of the impact of this challenge and support can be seen in some early help assessments, with improved quality and focus of assessments and better identification of those children and young people who need additional protection and support. While early help assessment quality is improving, management direction at the point of allocation is not evident. This is leading to some drift in initial contact being made with children and their families, and a lack of early focus in assessments.
(Recommendation)
14. Despite the much improved focus on early help, this has not yet led to a reduction in the number of contacts and referrals to children's social care. Although contacts and referrals are robustly screened, thresholds for access to statutory services are not yet fully understood or applied across the partnership. The local authority has a detailed understanding of its performance and its challenges around thresholds, and regularly reviews and analyses data. Its response has been a continued investment in early

help, ensuring that partner agencies are clear about where they can seek help and support for families who do not reach the threshold for social care intervention. In addition, the new children's hub, launched during this inspection, is showing early signs of impact, providing advice when contact is made with children's social care to determine the best course of action for the child.

15. The children's hub provides Stockton-on-Tees, in partnership with Hartlepool Borough Council, with a new single point of entry to children's social care. This new initiative brings together key agencies across the North Tees area which deliver services jointly to both boroughs. The children's hub benefits from partner agencies being co-located. This is already leading to earlier and more effective identification of risk, improved information sharing and joint decision-making. While contacts remain high, the number of strategy meetings and cases transferred for assessment have been reduced in the first two weeks of implementation. Information sharing and decision-making are effective, but the new arrangements currently lack evidence of recorded management decisions. (Recommendation)
16. There is a highly effective approach to safeguarding and managing risk. This includes out-of-hours services shared with a neighbouring authority. Children and young people are protected through effective multi-agency arrangements. When concerns about a child's or young person's safety are identified, robust action is taken to safeguard them. Inspectors did not identify any child for whom action had not been taken to ensure their safety. While child protection enquiries and information sharing are robust, the lack of attendance by Cleveland police at strategy discussions has an impact on the quality of analysis of risk at these meetings. Senior managers have repeatedly escalated this concern to senior officers in Cleveland police without effect. Inspectors referred one case back to senior managers, calling into question the decision of police to take no further action in one case when there was clear evidence of children suffering non-accidental injuries. The local authority did take action to safeguard the children. Senior managers acted promptly, escalating the inspectors' concerns to senior police officers where the response was robust. This resulted in the concerns being accepted, and the investigation was re-opened. Consequently, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector will act within the terms of the published information sharing protocol (agreed between all the relevant inspectorates) in sharing these findings with HMI Constabulary for it to decide what course of action is appropriate. (Recommendation)
17. The vast majority of child protection enquiries are thorough and well managed. There is clear evidence that children are seen during investigations and assessments, their voices heard and, where appropriate, direct work is undertaken. Single assessments are of good quality and are undertaken in the child's timescale. Assessments are comprehensive and detailed, contain a good understanding of the child's current circumstances, and provide a clear analysis of need, which focuses on risks and protective factors. Effective consideration of historical factors is evident, and social workers understand the child's journey. Assessments, in the main, are

responsive to diversity issues within families, and recognise children's and young people's unique characteristics and differences.

18. Children and young people are seen regularly by their social workers. Where appropriate, they are seen alone, and direct work is undertaken to ascertain their views and experiences. Where children and young people have communication difficulties, social workers adopt a variety of communication styles and bespoke methods to try to understand their views, and to ensure that their wishes and feelings influence assessments and plans wherever possible. When children and young people have complex needs, they have access to good-quality short-break provision. However, children wait too long for assessments and diagnoses for Autistic Spectrum Disorder. This is being addressed by joint commissioning approaches, but progress is too slow.
19. In December 2015, a social work model was introduced to support risk assessments and analysis and was evident during this inspection. It is beginning to have a positive impact on identifying risk and protective factors within families. Well-attended child protection conferences, reviews and core groups by key agencies, including Cleveland police, demonstrate the partnership commitment to managing risk and improving outcomes for children and young people. Minutes of key children's meetings show a rigorous consideration of risk, with the rationale for actions clearly recorded. When cases step down to child in need plans, the threshold is well evidenced. The impact can be seen in the low numbers of children becoming subject to child protection plans for a second or subsequent time.
20. While there is good evidence that child protection chairs are challenging where drift and delay is occurring, they are not yet having sufficient impact in progressing some children's plans, particularly where letters before proceedings have been issued to parents. Over 50 letters before proceedings are being managed within fieldwork teams. There is limited evidence that child protection chairs or frontline managers are getting to grips with reviewing these cases robustly enough. They are not challenging legal advisers over when authoritative action needs to be taken in instances where change is not being achieved soon enough. This is particularly in cases of chronic neglect or when previous children have been placed outside their parents' care. There is no evidence that, when challenges are raised with managers, the patterns and themes are collated or analysed to improve practice. (Recommendation)
21. There has been a decrease in the number of children subject to child protection plans and, at the time of the inspection, this stood at 294 (69 per 10,000 population). This is a significant improvement from March 2015, when children subject to plans equated to 83 per 10,000, nearly double the rate of national and statistical neighbours, at rates of 45 and 43 respectively. Neglect is the most common reason for children becoming subject to a child protection plan in Stockton-on-Tees, at 53%. Although this is below the national and regional averages, of 61.2% and 57% respectively, the local authority recognises that neglect is a major issue, and is piloting a social work model to assist with the assessment of risk. However, it is too early to evaluate its impact, as the pilot is in the very early stages of implementation.

22. Child protection plans developed using the social work model are of significantly better quality than those written prior to its introduction. Plans resulting from conferences where the model has been applied have a better focus on outcomes. Parents' and professionals' accountability is stipulated, with clear timescales for action, and danger statements are simple to understand. Outcome-focused actions link clearly to the identified risk issues, making it easy for families to understand what the concerns are and what they need to do to improve their child's circumstances. Child in need plans are weaker and are not yet informed by the model. The difference is quite stark as, while they do identify risk and need, they are not as clear to children, their families and professionals on what needs to happen, who is going to help or the timescales for change. Not all contain a contingency plan. This means that it is not explicit what action will be taken if a child's circumstances do not improve. (Recommendation)
23. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to attend their conferences and reviews through a commissioned advocacy service. Where children and young people do not attend their meetings, social workers have access to a number of tools for eliciting their views and, in almost all cases, the clear recording of these views was apparent. There is good evidence that parents and significant members of children's families are consulted. This includes absent fathers who have contact with children and/or hold parental responsibility.
24. Addressing the needs of victims of domestic abuse is a clear priority for Stockton-on-Tees, as prevalence is high. Within the early help service, strong partnership working is having a direct and positive impact on children and their families. A range of agencies and interventions are in evidence to support victims and children. Operation 'Encompass'³ has been operational since January 2016. It has already led to the more timely and effective management of domestic abuse notifications from police. This is resulting in a more coordinated multi-agency response, which is beginning to reduce risks for school-aged children. Effective arrangements are in place to consider high-risk cases via multi-agency referral and assessment conferences. Good multi-agency attendance at these meetings is providing a clear focus on children and the management of risk.
25. Where children and young people need therapeutic support and interventions, there are a wide range of multi-agency wrap-around services to help them. These include support to help children affected by domestic abuse, and children who have suffered sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and trauma. A range of services and effective packages of support are available to meet a diverse range of parental needs. Appropriate

³ Operation 'Encompass' is the implementation of key partnership working between Cleveland police, local authorities and nominated key adults in schools. When domestic abuse cases occur, the police share information with local schools to allow key adults the opportunity to engage with the child and to provide access to support that allows them to remain in a safe but secure familiar learning environment.

and timely referrals are made to children's social care by adult services when they identify children who are exposed to these risks.

26. When children and young people have suffered or are at risk of sexual exploitation, they are well safeguarded. Cohesive Tees-wide strategic partnerships bring together key agencies and organisations to ensure a focus on the most vulnerable children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees. Close cross-boundary work with neighbouring authorities ensures that information, intelligence, identification, and disruption and prevention activities are well coordinated. This adds value and strength to the safeguarding capacity of agencies in the borough via the strategic Tees-wide vulnerable, exploited, missing and trafficked group (VEMT). The VEMT has secured health funding to commission bespoke packages of support for victims of child sexual exploitation, and a new research project is due to commence in July 2016 that will focus on the needs of victims. This demonstrates the proactive focus of the partnership on this vulnerable group of children and young people.
27. Children who are at risk of sexual exploitation benefit from coordinated multi-agency responses, robust risk assessments and well-informed individual safety plans. Strategy meetings occur when concerns arise and escalation to the operational sub-group of VEMT, known as the VEMT Practitioners Group (VPG), ensures that effective multi-agency information is analysed to inform wider strategic planning, which is leading to risk reduction. A wide range of awareness-raising and preventative measures are operational and directed at children, parents and carers, the wider community and the business community. This includes licensed premises, hotels, public transport, retail and leisure, and professionals who work directly with children and their families.
28. Inspectors have seen evidence during case sampling of appropriate services to protect and offer support to girls affected by female genital mutilation. Clear policies and procedures are in place within children's social care and across the wider partnership. These are to ensure that professionals are alert to potential victims and what action to take to safeguard girls who are affected.
29. Comprehensive procedures based on effective collaboration between the local authorities, agency partners, the police and the local community are in place to identify individuals at risk of being drawn into terrorism. The 'Channel' arrangements are a key element of the local authority's 'Prevent' strategy. Early help staff and services are suitably trained and resourced to provide advice on the support that can be provided to safeguard those at risk of radicalisation.
30. When children go missing from home, every episode is notified by police to children's social care. If the child is not known to children's social care, early help workers carry out return home interviews. If families decline the offered appointment, they receive advice and support about services by telephone. Young people are seen alone, where appropriate, and a range of services are offered to the family, where needed. Although this service response is

good, unless the level of concern reaches the point where a child protection enquiry is required, the information gathered from return home interviews is not always analysed in full at the VPG. This is a missed opportunity to gather intelligence to inform future safety planning and profiling of 'missing' and child sexual exploitation concerns. (Recommendation)

31. Persistent actions are taken to ensure that children and young people who go missing from education are tracked and located. Strong links with schools, regional and national local authorities, border control, police and other key agencies help to keep the missing children register up to date and to locate families quickly. The local authority keeps accurate and up-to-date records on children and young people missing a full-time education. However, not enough challenge is brought to bear on schools to ensure that those on agreed part-time timetables are only on such timetables for very short periods, as the Department for Education's guidance expects. Eighteen young people have such timetables, and a significant minority have been on them for longer than a term. Pupils' absence rates are consistent with the national picture at both primary and secondary level. Stringent action when children do not regularly attend school led to 48 prosecutions last year.
32. Services and support for young people aged between 16 and 17 who become homeless, or are at risk of homelessness, are very comprehensive. There are excellent multi-agency arrangements, and a range of services are offered to ensure that any vulnerable young person will be offered a holistic assessment, appropriate accommodation and, if required and agreeable to them, will become looked after by the local authority.
33. The number of private fostering cases are low, despite positive action taken to raise awareness among partner agencies, the public and the council's own staff. Inspectors reviewed all five of the current arrangements. In the main, children are well supported, but social workers and managers are unclear about the criteria for private fostering arrangements. As a result, there are some delays in meeting the statutory responsibilities. For example, there are delays in responding to notifications, police checks regarding adults present in the home and the sign-off procedures. (Recommendation)
34. A dedicated officer provides robust management and overview of cases where there are allegations about staff, carers or volunteers who work with children across all sectors. Training and awareness-raising are a significant part of the role, and are having a positive impact on the number of enquiries and referrals from within social care and across the partnership.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement

Summary

When children and young people need to be looked after, good placements meet their immediate needs for care and protection. However, there is not enough support for those who are on the edge of care to prevent them from becoming looked after. High numbers of children looked after are placing increasing pressure on the local authority's ability to find good local placements. Effective action is being taken to recruit new foster carers and develop new children's homes within the borough. Despite these challenges, wherever possible brothers and sisters are placed together if this is in their best interests. Placement stability is good and there is good use of 'staying put' arrangements. There is no financial pressure to move children from independent provision if the placement meets a child's needs, and there are robust arrangements for safeguarding children and young people who are placed outside of the borough.

When children need legal permanence, the care proceedings progress through court in a timely way. However, permanence planning is not considered soon enough for all children. There is a lack of understanding of the regulations which support family and connected person's placements. Frontline managers do not always identify when drift is occurring or when procedures are not followed. Not all care plans are sufficiently outcome focused, and not all children are supported to understand their life story in a timely way.

When children are identified for adoption, effective matching takes place and placements are well supported. However, the recruitment of adopters is not sufficiently targeted, as it is not informed by a written detailed analysis of need, and the local authority does not yet have a 'foster to adopt' policy.

Good arrangements are in place to maintain and improve the health and emotional needs of children looked after. Strong, incisive leadership, and support and challenge by the virtual headteacher to schools, are helping to drive improvement in pupils' achievements and attendance. Social workers listen to children and young people, and act on their wishes and feelings. The participation of young people in service design and review is strong.

The collective action of the services across the council that work with care leavers is ensuring that they are well supported to develop the skills that they need to move on to independence. Virtually all live in suitable accommodation and remain in contact with services until they are at least 21. More care leavers move on to education, employment or training than similar groups nationally, including the proportion moving on to university. However, not enough care leavers have access to apprenticeships.

Inspection findings

35. Currently, 398 children are being looked after by the local authority. The high number of children looked after has been consistent for the past three years. Prior to this inspection, senior leaders recognised that there are some gaps in their approach that prevent children and young people becoming looked after. Consequently, they are developing a range of proposals as part of their transformation review. The proposals include creating a bespoke 'edge of care' family support service, developing more short-break services, enhancing the existing family group conferencing service and developing more restorative practice models. Inspectors were able to see some very early evidence of 'edge of care' support, but this is in its infancy and is not yet having an impact on reducing the need for some children to become looked after. (Recommendation)
36. When decisions are made for children to become looked after, these are appropriate. However, not all permanence options are considered soon enough for some children. Permanence planning is not always in evidence by a child's four-month review. Concurrent planning is underdeveloped. (Recommendation)
37. While placements within families are always considered as an alternative to foster care or residential care, social workers and their managers lack appropriate understanding of the regulations which support family and connected person's placements. For some children, this means that they do not become looked after when they should. These children do not acquire the legal status which entitles them and their carers to support from the local authority, and carers are not appropriately assessed. Children do, however, receive support under Section 17 of the Children Act. This has resulted in delay in some children securing permanence within their extended family and close friendship networks. Consequently, the number of children leaving care through special guardianship orders is low. During the inspection, senior managers acted promptly to review all arrangements where children are placed in family or friend placements, including those in private fostering arrangements. (Recommendation)
38. When children require legal permanence, the cases progress through care proceedings in a timely way. There are positive relationships between the local authority, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the local judiciary. The length of time to decide care proceedings is timely, within 26 weeks. This is above the England average. However, there is some weakness in the quality of the work undertaken in the pre-proceedings stage of the process. Letters before proceedings are not clear about what is required of parents to achieve positive change. There is insufficient challenge by frontline managers and legal advisers when drift is occurring and change is not being achieved within the child's timescale. However, families are offered support and services during this period to ensure that children are safeguarded. The judiciary report that, while most proceedings progress in a timely way, the quality of some final evidence, particularly in relation to final care plans, is not evidenced or argued well enough. (Recommendation)

39. Where children and young people are looked after under voluntary arrangements, these are reviewed regularly by senior managers in order to avoid drift. When children are placed with their parents under a care order, the order is appropriately supported, monitored and reviewed. Where it is safe for children to return home, assessments are undertaken to ensure that the risks which led to the child becoming looked after have been sufficiently reduced, and that there is evidence of purposeful work to support and monitor these arrangements. There are currently three unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people looked after in Stockton-on-Tees. Their needs are robustly assessed, in keeping with statutory guidance. Each young person has received culturally sensitive support and appropriate responses to their needs.
40. The work by the independent reviewing officers (IROs) is a strength. Their caseloads have recently been reduced to a manageable level. The vast majority (93.4%) of children's and young people's reviews are completed within the required timescale. Children and young people benefit from good relationships with their IRO and, wherever possible, they visit children and young people in placement before their review. Consequently, the level of children's and young people's engagement in their review is good. It is acknowledged by IROs that visiting those children and young people who are placed out of borough is a challenge. However, they have begun to develop more creative measures to consult with children and young people, and currently are piloting Skype and Facetime methods. This is not intended to replace visiting placements.
41. While there is evidence that IROs do challenge social workers and managers with regard to care planning, this does not always have the desired impact. Frontline managers are not always effective in ensuring that plans are being progressed in a timely way. They do not always ensure that social work records or care plans are of high enough quality. While positive outcomes are achieved for most children and young people, this cannot always be explicitly linked to their care plan. Many care plans are not sufficiently focused on the outcome to be achieved, and contain too much information about the child's history and experiences. A small number of young people have told their IRO that they find the amount of information that is contained within their plans upsetting and difficult to read. The DCS has responded positively to this feedback and is currently reviewing the care plan format. (Recommendation)
42. Social workers visit children and young people regularly, and engage them in meaningful and constructive ways. Social workers and managers know children well. The wishes and feelings of children and young people can be seen in their assessments and plans, and their voices are heard clearly in their reviews. There is good access to an independent visitor and advocacy service. There is no waiting list, and those children and young people placed out of the local authority area have equal access. While the advocacy service is mainly used for wishes and feelings work, it has also enabled young people to express their views without having to complain formally. There is a very healthy culture promoted by senior managers and political

leaders to learn from the views of children and young people and to involve them in shaping services. The 'Positive Activities Group' for the under-12s, the 'Let's Take Action' group for the over-12s, and the 'Young Inspectors' group influence the local authority's practice and ensure that changes are made as a result. An example has been installing wi-fi in the council's own children's homes, increasing activities for adolescents at the supervised contact centre, interviewing staff and purchasing bicycles for a children's home.

43. The participation and influence of children and young people in the development of services are palpable. Their influence has helped to create a variety of groups, for example offering a safe place for children and young people to share stories, building skills and self-esteem, training young people as mentors and developing support networks across the children looked after and care leaver services. Celebrations events take place throughout the year and are well attended by senior leaders, the DCS, the chief executive officer (CEO), elected members, managers and staff across children's services. There is a corporate commitment to children looked after. Children who are placed out of area are invited and supported to attend. No child or young person is forgotten. Children and young people report that they have good access to leisure facilities and activities. All children, including those placed out of the borough, can access a corporate fund to promote their social interests. Carers have delegated authority to ensure that decisions regarding children's access to recreation and leisure activities are met in a timely way.
44. Children with complex needs benefit from a specialist social work team. Staff are confident and skilled. A range of easy-to-read information is available to signpost and inform families and professionals to where they can receive services and support. When children's care and support needs exceed 75 days, they become looked after, and receive sensitive and bespoke responses to their identified needs. Young people who need to transition to adult social care services are allocated a worker promptly. They receive an assessment with individualised support to prepare for independence or transfer to adult social care.
45. There are significant pressures on the local authority to meet its sufficiency duty, as a result of the high numbers of children looked after. Consequently, the children looked after strategy is being refreshed. Senior managers are very knowledgeable about the types of placements needed for individual children and where there are gaps in provision. All placement decisions are scrutinised and challenged at scrutiny panel. All children requiring external placements are referred to the children's multi-agency placements panel, chaired by the DCS. This gives the DCS contemporary knowledge of the placement needs of individual children and where there are placement pressures. However, currently there is no written strategic needs assessment or demand analysis. Most placement commissioning is done on an individual basis. The lack of a strategic needs analysis means that some gaps in required provision go unnoticed, if they are not a regular occurrence. For example, for some time there has been no provision in Stockton-on-Tees

for young people detained under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.
(Recommendation)

46. The lack of a strategic needs analysis does not mean that placement commissioning has stood still. Effective action has been taken to recruit new foster carers and create new children's homes within the borough. A successful recruitment campaign has increased the number of in-house foster carers, providing improved placement choice. The recent restructuring within children's services has increased the capacity of the child placement team, enabling a better focus on support and training for foster carers. Retention rates are good and there is a loyal foster care base. Foster carers report that there is good communication with social workers and link workers. As a result, they feel well supported and well informed. Foster carers are appropriately assessed, and the records held meet the required standard. Robust action is taken when allegations are made against foster carers, and they are offered independent advice and support at these times.
47. There are robust arrangements in place to commission and monitor all independent placements and secure settings. No child is placed in any residential provision that is judged by Ofsted to be less than good. There has been a 24% reduction in the number of independent fostering agency placements required as a direct result of a successful foster care recruitment campaign. A recent joint venture with a private company has begun to reduce the number of external residential placements. This is an innovative project which is still developing, resulting in three new children's homes in Stockton-on-Tees and another in the planning stage. There is also an off-site education facility. There is no financial pressure to move children from independent provision if the placement meets the child's needs. These developments demonstrate the decisive action taken by the local authority to provide good-quality local placement options for children and young people.
48. Placement stability is good at 69.4%, and is better than the national average. The vast majority of children and young people are looked after in foster care. An increasing number of young people (16) are remaining with foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements. Young people and carers value these arrangements highly. There has been a slight reduction in the number of children and young people being placed out of borough, which is positive and demonstrates that the measures put in place to keep children near their homes are working.
49. Family finding is undertaken nationally and locally. There are examples of careful matching and introduction to carers when children have a planned move into foster care or residential care. Talking books, pictures and 'play dates' are all used to ensure that younger children are well prepared. Where appropriate, brothers and sisters are placed together to ensure that attachments are maintained. Children are matched well to placements. Foster carers receive additional training to ensure that they are well equipped to meet the needs of the children placed with them. Wrap-around support from dedicated children, adolescent, mental health service (CAMHS) workers provides consultation and support to social workers and carers to help them to understand children's needs and the impact of their

experiences. While inspectors saw examples of some positive work undertaken with individual children to prepare them for permanence, life-story work is not completed in a timely way, overall. The vast majority of children placed in permanent homes or those with a plan for permanence do not have a sense of their history, their family or the reasons that they are unable to return to their birth parents' care. Some children have waited over two years for this service. (Recommendation)

50. Children and young people who need supervised contact with their birth families receive a good service. Contact is supported in a child-friendly environment by trained contact staff in a bespoke contact centre. Where community-based contact is needed, experienced staff manage these arrangements based on thorough risk assessments and clear plans. Positive action has been taken to reduce the number of children and young people looked after who commit offences. Good work with residential providers and foster carers on restorative practices, and also close links with the youth offending team and community police officers, is ensuring that the needs of children looked after and their additional vulnerabilities are known and understood.
51. When children looked after are suffering or are at risk of exposure to child sexual exploitation, the risk assessments are robust. Wrap-around protective and therapeutic services ensure that children and young people are safeguarded. Child protection procedures are undertaken as appropriate and, where required, risk assessments are presented to the vulnerable persons group. Here, individual safety planning for the child is discussed at a multi-agency meeting, and information is shared to inform wider protection and prevention strategies.
52. When children and young people go missing from their placement, they do not always receive a return home interview, particularly those children and young people living out of borough. Senior managers have recognised this gap and are in the process of commissioning an independent provider to deliver this service. Inspectors have reviewed the service proposal and specification. While it meets this need, the current policies and procedures do not ensure that information from all return home interviews will be extrapolated and analysed. Consequently, this does not always inform individual safety planning for children and young people, or wider strategic analysis of possible links to child sexual exploitation. This is a gap. (Recommendation)
53. Senior managers and political leaders have evidenced their aspiration to improve the educational experience and outcomes for children looked after, with identifiable impact. Support is tailored to their individual needs. Robust leadership challenge and support by the virtual headteacher and the virtual school team of school leaders are driving improvement in the achievement, progress and attendance of children looked after. Gaps between children looked after and other pupils are narrower than those found nationally for similar groups. Outcomes in reading for children looked after at the end of key stage 2 have been above those found nationally for similar groups for the past two years. Results for writing and mathematics in 2015 dipped

slightly, but combined reading, writing and mathematics remained well above average for this group. The proportion of key stage 4 children looked after who gain five good GCSEs including English has been above that of similar pupils for two of the past three years. In 2015, 20% of young people reached this threshold, while only 12% did so nationally. Current tracking indicates that 26% of young people will do so this year.

54. The progress that children looked after make from their starting points in the early years is also above that found nationally. Currently, 70% are on track to achieve their learning goals. This is a significant improvement on 33% last year. A similar pattern of rapid improvement has been seen in key stage 1 this year. No children looked after are missing from school and none are missing from education through permanent exclusion. A small number (eight) have an alternative curriculum pathway designed to meet their individual needs. Currently, five pupils attend the local authority's pupil referral unit (PRU). All but two children looked after have access to their 25 hours of school provision. Both of these pupils have complex needs, and one is currently attending the PRU. These pupils are provided with additional one-to-one support in their homes.
55. Concerted efforts are made to ensure that children looked after attend good or better schools. At 83%, the proportion is broadly similar to that found for all children in Stockton-on-Tees and nationally. Robust commissioning arrangements and pre-placement checks ensure that children with complex needs placed out of the borough are in good or better provision, and they are achieving well. Checks have been made to ensure the suitability of provision. Regular visits from the educational development adviser and key local authority staff ensure that young people are safe and their needs are well met, and that they are achieving well.
56. Good actions have been taken to ensure continuity of school placements for children looked after when living arrangements break down or when they become looked after. The proportion is reducing, year-on-year. Only 7% have had more than one move this year as a result of a planned move to specialist provision. Significant, successful work has been carried out with schools to develop and implement personal education plans that meet individual pupils' needs, track their progress regularly, include measurable targets for improvement and identify the impact of the use of the additional government funding for looked after pupils, termed the 'pupil premium plus'. Rigorous monitoring of plans takes place to make sure that they are conducted on time, are of a good quality and drive improvement. Where there are concerns, action is required to be taken immediately. For example, the virtual headteacher knows that improvements are required from some out-of-borough schools. This is being tackled through the work of the designated education development adviser.
57. Health outcomes for children looked after are good. Initial health assessment completion rates are high, at 91.8%. Good commissioning arrangements ensure that, where children have complex needs, the interventions, provision and support are of high quality. The co-location of CAMHS workers in permanence teams helps to ensure a timely and coordinated response to

children presenting emotional and mental health difficulties. Children looked after wait no more than 24 hours for initial triage and no more than seven days for access to treatment. Bespoke therapeutic services are available for children experiencing trauma and abuse. There is good access to sexual health services and advice, and more general issues which young people need help to discuss and understand.

58. Good use is made of strengths and difficulties questionnaires. Completion rates are high, and the information is used to support individual children and young people, and to identify where there are gaps in service provision. Where needs are identified, actions to develop services are progressed within the children looked after health forum and the multi-agency looked after partnership (MALAP) meetings. A range of commissioned substance misuse and alcohol support services are available to engage children, young people and their carers in education, support and treatment, where required.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it requires improvement.

59. Adoption is not always considered at an early enough stage when it would be appropriate for some children. There are some delays in progressing plans once children become looked after. While parallel plans are considered for most children, this is not always reducing delay in securing early permanence. Some delays are incurred as the family-finding process does not begin as soon as adoption becomes the plan following a statutory review. The local authority does not make use of 'foster to adopt' and concurrent placements. (Recommendation)
60. The Department for Education's (DfE's) published figures for the year 2014–15 reported that the average number of days for a child entering care to being placed with their adoptive family in Stockton-on-Tees was 556. This is well above the national target of 487 days and above the England average of 533 days. The local authority's own data for 2015–16 records that the average time children waited had lengthened to 675 days.
61. The latest-published DfE figures for 2012–15 for the number of days between a local authority receiving the court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family was 273 days, against the target of 121 days. For the year 2014–15, the average time waited was 270 days. In the local authority's own data for 2015–16, this had lengthened to 361 days. Only two of the 18 children adopted in the last 12 months took less than the 2015–16 target of 121 days. This means that some children and young people have experienced long delays in securing permanence through adoption.
62. Senior managers had already interrogated this data prior to the inspection, and an action plan was in evidence but not yet having an impact. The local authority produces a comprehensive monthly performance report that provides both an overview and details of progress in relation to individual

children. There is good evidence from this information that every effort is made to identify the best possible match for children. Where there are delays in matching children to suitable adopters, there are good and appropriate reasons. Social workers do not give up and will endeavour to match all children, regardless of the complexity of their needs.

63. While performance scrutiny is good and every effort is made to find suitable adopters, there is no detailed action plan alongside the overarching children looked after strategy to inform adoption recruitment. The links between the child placement team and the fieldwork teams are not effective enough. Individual tracking tools used in the fieldwork teams to monitor the care planning for children are not shared with the placement team until the agency decision maker (ADM) agrees the adoption plan. This means that the child placement team is not receiving the earliest possible notification of those children who may require placements. The ADM is suitably qualified and of appropriate experience and seniority within the local authority. However, the ADM does not clearly record how they have considered and taken account of all the information available to them, and not all ADM decisions contain a clear rationale to support their decision. (Recommendation)
64. The child placement team provides adoption and fostering services. The service is stable, and the majority of staff and managers have considerable experience in fostering and adoption. The local authority has invested in the service by creating additional social worker posts to progress plans for permanence in a more timely way. However, the recent increase in connected persons' assessments being referred has had a further impact on the capacity of social workers, as these form part of their generic caseload across fostering and adoption work. The impact of this investment, therefore, is yet to be evidenced. Senior managers recognise that improvements are required within the service. Senior managers had intended to separate the service into dedicated fostering and adoption teams in the autumn of 2015 following a restructure. Plans were subsequently put on hold as a result of the move towards regional/sub regional arrangements, with some temporary management arrangements in place.
65. When children do have a plan of adoption, social workers try hard to involve and consult children at all stages of the adoption process, ascertaining and taking into account their views in a way which is sensitive to, and consistent with, their age and understanding. Social workers in the permanence teams undertake assessments of brothers and sisters being placed together. The quality of those sampled by inspectors is not always good. Referrals are made promptly to the agency medical adviser, who provides comprehensive and timely health reports to the adoption panel. Life-story work is undertaken with some children. However, the completion of life-story books and later-life letters is delayed in the majority of cases and not available by the second adoption review. (Recommendation)
66. Family finding for adoption is undertaken in the child placements team by the supervising social worker for the child's foster carer. Foster carers spoken to say that the social worker who supports them has knowledge of the children,

and that this facilitates more focused and appropriate family finding. There is evidence of effective collaboration with voluntary adoption agencies, attendance at bi-monthly family exchange meetings, and membership of Adoption Link and the Adoption Register. In addition, social workers in the placements team use adoption activity events including 'play dates' to offer the children and potential adopters informal opportunities to meet one another. This has proved successful for several children, particularly older children, who have waited for adoption.

67. There is an up-to-date statement of purpose for adoption, which provides clarity for potential adopters about the process they will need to undertake. It sets clear timescales in accordance with national minimum standards.
68. The length of time for adoption assessments is variable. The majority are completed within 140 days and, in cases sampled where the assessment took longer, the records evidence the appropriateness of that delay. Adopters spoken to were all positive about the quality and promptness of initial responses to adoption enquiries. They reported feeling valued, respected and supported. They reported that the preparation training was experienced by them as very effective, with the focus on the child being particularly helpful. The assessment process is described by adopters as intense and thorough. Adopters appreciate the consistency of having the same social worker throughout, which supports building trusting relationships.
69. The adoption panel is properly constituted and well managed. The chair has an appropriate level of knowledge and expertise, and the minutes of the panel evidence challenge and scrutiny of adoption plans and matches. The panel chair provides a six-monthly report to senior managers that details the performance, progress and outcomes of panel.
70. The average time from adopters making an application to Stockton-on-Tees and having a placement made is 437 days. The local authority actively promotes the adoption register, Adoption Matters and Adoption Link once adopters are approved at panel, if it is unable immediately to identify a child for matching. Examples were seen of adopters being matched with children in other parts of England, and of children looked after by Stockton-on-Tees placed with adopters approved by other agencies. The local authority is tenacious in seeking adopters for older children, those with a disability and those with complex emotional needs.
71. Once adoptive placements are made, these are appropriate for the majority of children. There have been no adoption breakdowns in the past 12 months. In 2014–15, there was just one adoption breakdown. At the time of the inspection, 44 children were identified as having an adoption decision. Seven children have had their decision reversed in the past 12 months. In three cases, adopters could not be found for children with very complex needs who subsequently remained with their foster carers. In four cases, the court did not accept the local authority's plan for adoption. Discussion with the local judiciary found that the local authority's legal advice is not robust enough, in some cases, when adoption is put before the court as the

preferred option, and its evidence is not always well presented or backed up. (Recommendation)

72. The adoption support plans seen were comprehensive and detailed. Post-adoption support, including work with birth relatives, is good. This is provided through a commissioned organisation. Requests for post-adoption support are responded to promptly and, if more complex therapeutic needs are identified which cannot be met through local services, applications are made to the adoption support fund.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is outstanding.

73. The council and its partners aspire to go beyond statutory requirements to support their care leavers. The determination that they have to do the best for their young people can be seen in the impressive proportion of care leavers with whom they keep in touch. Senior leaders have made a conscious decision to ensure that every possible effort is made to maintain meaningful contact with their young people, recognising the additional vulnerability of this group. The local authority is in touch with all but one of their 122 care leavers. This is well above that found nationally.
74. Care leavers develop trusting relationships with their personal advisers, who provide them with thoughtful, individualised support or put them in touch with the right people to help them. Relationships get off to a good start because personal advisers co-work with young people's social workers once they reach the age of 16. Consequently, personal advisers have a good understanding of young people's strengths and needs. This information is used well to support young people to develop the skills that they need to move on to independence when they are ready to do so. Targeted work from personal advisers, carers and staff in residential settings builds young people's skills in managing budgets, household work and cooking. The good relationships engendered and the access to additional support build care leavers' confidence and emotional well-being effectively.
75. Senior leaders have high aspirations for their care leavers and strive to enable their young people to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. There is good evidence of timely, targeted, multi-agency work from the care-leaving service. It works effectively with the virtual school, transitions mentors, colleges and Youth Direction. This is a council-wide integrated support service for children and young people that provides a wide range of statutory, targeted, preventative and universal services, including independent careers advice and guidance, the virtual school and the youth offending team. This partnership has resulted in a higher than average proportion of care leavers moving into education, employment and training than nationally for similar young people. Careful tracking makes sure that each young person's whereabouts and current situation are well known.

Rapid action is taken to help those at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training).

76. The multi-agency looked after partnership (MALAP) for children looked after and care leavers has a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in services for care leavers. The care leaver's team is held to account for the improvement in the proportion of care leavers in education and training through regular reports to senior managers and members. Conversely, it also challenges senior managers on improvements needed from services across the council. For example, it has reported that there are too few care leavers with an apprenticeship, at just four in number. The corporate management team accepted this and has recently developed a council-wide vision for improvement.
77. Strong partnerships with local and regional universities ensure that taster sessions, conferences and individual support encourage young people into a university course that is right for them. Although at 11%, as nationally, the proportion is below that for all young people, the proportion is greater than that nationally for similar groups. Once on a course, young people are supported well and in line with their individual preferences. Arrangements are in place to ensure that those who wish to return to their chosen living arrangements in the area at holiday times do so. Personal advisers make sure that young people at university access the right level of funding, or additional financial and other support, in times of need.
78. Care leavers spoken to by inspectors say that they feel safe and are supported well to understand risks to their safety and well-being from risks such as drugs, alcohol, social media and child sexual exploitation. Care leavers spoke with passion about their personal advisers. One young person told inspectors that their personal advisers were 'always on the case about this sort of thing'. They report that they receive regular advice and help to stay healthy and live healthy lifestyles. All young people are registered with a doctor and dentist, and have up-to-date health and dental assessments. However, work to ensure that they move on to independence with a full record of their medical history has been slow. Delays have been exacerbated by technical issues in the health service's data and information process. A group of young people have already designed the 'health passport' folders and are awaiting the resolution of these problems.
79. Care leavers benefit from dedicated support from CAMHS, a clinical psychologist and a leaving care nurse. CAMHS appointments are prioritised, and care leavers are seen within a week. The leaving care nurse offers a 'one-stop shop' for contraception advice. She provides confidential, personalised advice, as well as directing young people to other services, such as drugs and alcohol services, counselling, therapeutic services and the family nurse partnership. This service is provided to care-leaving mothers up to their child's second birthday, and includes intensive health visitor support for teenage mothers throughout their first pregnancy. Despite this good work, not all pathway plans identify clearly enough how young people's health needs are being met.

80. Pathway plans have been refined by merging two documents into one. However, leaders know that there is still some way to go to ensure that they are a useful and effective plan for improvement. All pathway plans are completed within the timescales required. Plans have some strengths, generally contain a detailed analysis of young people's needs and take into account their views. Young people usually attend meetings to review their plans, with IROs for those aged up to 18 and a dedicated care-leaving service reviewing officer for those aged over 18. The tasks (actions) identified are linked to the analysis of needs. However, they do not always describe exactly what needs to be done or which tasks are a priority. There is no section against which the impact of actions can be checked. Plans do not always identify the diverse range of direct work that actually takes place with young people. (Recommendation)
81. Strong partnership working ensures that virtually all care leavers move on to suitable accommodation of their choice, and when they are ready to do so. At 93%, this is well above that found nationally. 'Young Inspectors' review all semi-independent accommodation to check that it is of a suitable standard and somewhere that they would like to live. They ensure that the corporate management team takes decisive action to tackle any areas identified to be in need of improvement. Accommodation and living needs are addressed well, because of the effective youth accommodation panel and services that tackle young people's needs holistically and ensure that the right support is put in place. Close links between the care-leaving service and the transitions worker for children with disabilities ensure that these young people have a good understanding of their entitlements from the service and the additional support available. Liaison with adult workers when young people are moving on from care helps to smooth transitions into their adult arrangements effectively.
82. Care leavers are encouraged to remain in supported placements beyond the age of 18, and an increasing proportion do so. The number of 'staying put' arrangements, whereby those aged 18 or over can remain with their carers until they are ready to move on, have doubled from eight to 16 in the past two years. Young people value this support, and the increasing range of transitional flats and supported living arrangements, which provide an effective transition into independence. One young person spoke movingly of how his life has been turned around due to the dedicated support and care provided by the team in his semi-independent accommodation. Young people also report how they value the work of the dedicated weekend support worker, who offers practical and emotional support over the weekend. One young person is in bed and breakfast accommodation, but this is the first time that this has happened for many years and is the young person's choice despite considerable efforts by staff to provide more appropriate accommodation.
83. The care-leaving service ensures that young people have a good understanding of their entitlements. Care leavers report that they know how to complain when they have concerns, and are actively encouraged to do so. The 'Let's Take Action' group, part of the Children in Care Council, works

closely with senior leaders to make sure that they understand young people's views and take action when concerns or suggestions are made. For example, the council's leaving care exit survey identified that a few young people felt that they were not prepared well for independence. As a result, a programme of courses has been developed to focus on the range of independence skills that are needed. 'Let's Take Action' has developed an updated 21st century pledge for children in care. It includes a simple and clear 'emoji' version and a poster that is clear about the council's pledges.

84. Great attention is paid to celebrating the achievements of care leavers. Alongside the annual high-profile celebration evening and the 'young person of the year' shield, there are many examples. These include individual letters of congratulation from the DCS and staff who work with young people, attendance at special events and shows, and presents at birthdays and significant celebration events.

Leadership, management and governance

Good

Summary

Political and professional leaders demonstrate determination and a commitment to keep children and young people safe in Stockton-on-Tees, with some examples of outstanding practice. There is a highly effective multi-agency approach to safeguarding and managing risk across the partnership. Clear governance arrangements ensure that leaders discharge their collective responsibilities well. The DCS provides strong and effective leadership, and lines of accountability are clear. Strategic planning is highly effective and responsive to the complex and diverse needs of children, young people and their families. Prioritisation is based on a very accurate understanding of what is working well and what needs to improve. The senior leadership team is therefore focusing on the right things.

There are strong and effective links between the local authority and voluntary and community sector organisations. The DCS takes a fundamental role in the strategic developments, both within Stockton-on-Tees and across wider Teesside partnerships, and has been instrumental in commissioning thematic reviews of social work practice within the Stockton-on-Tees Local Safeguarding Children Board (SLSCB). Collaborative working through the SLSCB and joint commissioning of services has strengthened partnerships. Agencies work effectively together in response to agreed priorities, with the aim of developing and improving services to children.

Children are at the heart of service delivery in Stockton-on-Tees. The extent to which all leaders and elected members engage with children and young people is outstanding. Children and young people are actively involved in developing services across the partnership, and are extensively engaged through the MALAP. Leadership across the local authority is highly visible and accessible. There is a strong focus on performance management that continually drives improvement in services, ensuring that leaders and managers at all levels have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. There is a comprehensive quality assurance programme, including regular and themed audits. Senior managers have taken effective action to address the challenges in identifying a sufficient number of local placements for children looked after. However, they do not have a strategic needs assessment to inform placement commissioning. While they have begun to develop some 'edge of care' services, not enough preventive action has been taken to support children and families so that fewer children become looked after, or to improve the numbers of children who cease to be looked after through adoption.

Workforce planning is highly effective. Supervision is taking place regularly and there is evidence of management oversight, but it is not yet focusing sufficiently on the quality of social work practice. Senior managers have responded effectively to challenges in respect of social work recruitment and retention, developing a comprehensive workforce strategy. The children and young people's select committee is effective in scrutinising services for children through a programme of detailed briefings, performance management information, visits to frontline services, and engagement with children and young people.

Inspection findings

85. The DCS has set solid foundations from which to improve practice and outcomes for children in Stockton-on-Tees, supported by the CEO, elected members and the senior management team. There is a strong culture of openness and a focus on achieving improvement. During the inspection, senior managers fully embraced the concept of improvement through inspection. They used the process to its best advantage by responding swiftly and positively to emerging inspection findings.
86. Strategic priorities are translated well into strategic planning and promote a partnership approach to safeguarding children and young people. Strategic plans are explicit in setting clear objectives to improve services, and performance targets are increasingly ambitious. There is a very good track record of sustained improvement. Extensive restructuring took place across the local authority in 2015, resulting in increased investment in children's services to address identified capacity issues. In April 2016, the changes brought about to deliver transformation under the local authority's 'Big Picture' programme resulted in a director of adults' services role, in addition to the DCS. This appointment has provided additional capacity for the DCS to drive key improvements, including the DCS role itself, in leading a range of strategic developments within Stockton-on-Tees and across wider Teesside partnerships. The DCS has also been instrumental in leading the development of the multi-agency children's hub, in collaboration with Hartlepool. This went live on 1 June 2016. Its aim is to strengthen the understanding of thresholds across partner agencies, and to ensure a coordinated and well-informed response to children and families in need of support.
87. Senior managers, leaders and elected members discharge their individual and collective responsibilities well. Arrangements between elected members, senior leaders and strategic groups responsible for developing services for vulnerable children, including the SLSCB and the Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) are clear, well understood and applied. The CEO, DCS and lead member of the council meet regularly. These successful partnerships provide a shared focus on how well children and young people are helped, cared for and protected in Stockton-on-Tees.
88. Elected members have a good understanding of the priorities for children's services. The lead member is instrumental in ensuring that children's issues are a high priority across the local authority, and is visible across many forums, including cabinet and scrutiny. Elected members make it their business to know what is happening for children through detailed briefings, performance information and visits to frontline services. They proactively seek to ensure that children are receiving the right support, engaging with children and young people through various forums and championing their interests.
89. The children and young people's select committee undertakes extensive work to scrutinise frontline practice. During the last year, the committee scrutinised services provided by all children's homes in the borough, meeting

with children's homes' managers and reviewing inspection outcomes. It has carried out an extensive review to ensure that arrangements to respond to child sexual exploitation and missing children are effective. Members are delivering a rolling programme of site visits to the frontline services, and the committee meets formally with children looked after. This work strengthens members' understanding of frontline practice, and how children and young people experience the services and support that they receive.

90. The commitment to children is evident across every layer of the local authority. The local authority has made a strategic promise that not one child in the borough will be knowingly let down or forgotten. Young people are actively involved in developing services across the partnership through their engagement in the Stockton-on-Tees youth assembly. Young people have helped to shape services, including the health needs assessment, a sports and leisure programme and the design of the local authority website.
91. The local authority knows itself well. Its self-assessment reflected almost all of the inspection findings. The local authority is a learning organisation that seeks to strengthen self-awareness through external scrutiny, peer challenge and external audits. This open, reflective approach ensures that strategic planning informs a concrete understanding of the real issues affecting children's lives. Internal scrutiny of practice, including peer auditing, complaints and performance analysis, further facilitates self-awareness, and consequently an improvement in social work practice and outcomes for children and young people. Strategic priorities are aligned and informed by the Tees Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). Some of the analysis is not up to date but, in response to a recent local government association review of the HWB, actions are in hand to review this.
92. Key strategic bodies, such as the HWB and the children's and young people's partnership, focus well on progressing significant strategic areas of development for children. Work programmes are aligned, lines of accountability are transparent and networking is effective, with little duplication. The local authority and partners have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of children and families, and are delivering a wide range of quality and appropriate services to respond to the diverse needs of this population. The CEO and lead member are both active and influential participating observers of the SLSCB. Relationships between the local authority, Cafcass and the courts are constructive, with regular informal and formal meetings, and engagement through the Local Family Justice Board.
93. Partnerships are strong, including the interface with the SLSCB which is supported by rigorous governance arrangements facilitated by the DCS and senior management team. Prior to the inspection, the local authority had identified that it had further work to do to enhance other partnership working, including securing better attendance by police in strategy meetings, strengthening partner agencies' understanding of thresholds, and ensuring that early help is used effectively by partner agencies to prevent escalation of need. (Recommendation)

94. Commissioning arrangements within the children's and young people's joint commissioning group are robust and well informed. The group draws on the JSNA and local sources of data to inform commissioning decisions. The local authority commissioning function transferred to public health in 2015 as part of the local authority-wide restructure. Monthly and quarterly performance meetings focus clearly on monitoring the effectiveness of commissioned contracts.
95. Commissioners have effective relationships with all providers, including private, voluntary and public sector providers. Consequently, children and young people are receiving good levels of support from locally commissioned services. Domestic abuse services, and services to support children who have experienced child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, provide effective support and interventions. A range of procurement and other commissioning mechanisms are used to secure a good range of services for children looked after. For example, a review of the CAMHS contract has resulted in improvements in the continuity of support to children looked after and care leavers, and integrated multi-disciplinary support to families in need of early help.
96. There is a comprehensive quality assurance programme, driven by an overarching audit plan. A well-embedded audit process informs practice improvement. Random and themed case audits are undertaken monthly, and are subject to moderation and scrutiny to ensure consistency. Monitoring of audit outcomes ensures that actions are progressed. As a result, senior managers have identified areas of practice that needed strengthening over the last year, including the quality of chronologies, case recording, supervision and care plans. A range of actions were implemented to address identified weaknesses, such as improved performance monitoring, amended guidance and templates, and targeted training. Audit findings are shared at monthly performance clinics and team health checks, as well as with the SLSCB, to ensure that learning is considered. Although this is a comprehensive process, during case sampling the inspectors did not always agree with some managers' audits of the quality of practice. This demonstrates that not all managers are clear and consistent in respect of their understanding of what good practice looks like. (Recommendation)
97. Performance management is well established and systematic. The children and young people's select committee, cabinet and the corporate parenting board regularly scrutinise data and consider progress against priorities. A comprehensive performance framework, performance reporting and live datasets monitor compliance and track progress. Managers have access to a broad range of performance information, including live trackers that provide increased scrutiny of specific areas of practice, such as chronologies and supervision. Monthly performance clinics and the newly developed team health checks ensure that performance is considered in the round, drawing on qualitative information such as audit feedback and complaints. However, there is further work to do to strengthen the performance framework. There is no evaluation of independent reviewing officer escalations to consider themes, and there needs to be greater focus on the qualitative aspects of

supervision, including its effectiveness in driving children's plans.
(Recommendation)

98. Staff supervision is taking place and there is evidence of management oversight, but it is neither sufficiently reflective nor consistently effective in progressing all children's plans or actions required. Senior managers had taken action prior to the inspection to tackle identified weaknesses regarding the consistency of supervision and management oversight. This resulted in improvements in the regularity of supervision, but there is more to do to strengthen the quality and the effectiveness of management oversight.
(Recommendation)
99. Historically, the workforce has been extremely stable, but over the last year there has been an increase in vacancies. This has led to pressures in allocating cases, as well as social workers struggling to deliver work to the required standards within timescales. Senior managers have responded rigorously and swiftly to this changing picture, appointing agency social workers to fill gaps, strengthening recruitment and retention strategies, and increasing financial investment. The caseload management system introduced some time ago has helped to ensure that caseloads are set at manageable levels. This approach is beginning to evidence impact, with all but two social work vacancies filled at the time of the inspection and additional agency staff appointed above capacity where needed.
100. Employee and social work surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction across the workforce. Social workers are positive about working for Stockton-on-Tees. They feel well supported, and find that managers at all levels are visible and available. They feel heard and that their ideas shape service delivery, both through individual consultation and collectively through the social work board. Some social workers told inspectors how the recruitment and retention strategy and caseload management system had made a difference to their workloads and made them feel valued.
101. Political and professional leaders take their corporate parenting roles seriously, scrutinising service delivery to ensure that they are meeting the needs of children looked after and care leavers. Despite the extent of this scrutiny, a number of weaknesses in the service provided to children looked after have not been given sufficient focus. Plans for permanence are not always considered early enough. This is exacerbated by delays for some children, because managers have not understood and interpreted correctly the guidance and regulations on placements with connected persons or family members. For some children, there is a lack of timely work to prepare them to understand their life history. (Recommendation)
102. Despite robust commissioning arrangements, the local authority faces considerable challenges to provide sufficient accommodation within Stockton-on-Tees to meet the needs of the children whom they are looking after. There are insufficient in-house foster placements. Senior managers have taken action to respond to this, engaging with independent fostering agencies to ensure competitive contracts, as well as strengthening foster carer recruitment. The local authority has also taken positive action to

respond to shortfalls in the availability of local residential provision, building its own capacity by tendering for a joint venture partnership. This has resulted in the commissioning of three new local children's homes to enable children to be placed closer to their homes. The resource team undertakes monitoring visits to children in all external residential placements. These are an added assurance that children are effectively safeguarded.

103. While good-quality placements are found, this is still not sufficient to meet demand. Most placements are commissioned on a 'spot purchasing' basis. Although senior managers have a good understanding of future placement needs, they do not have a written strategic needs analysis to inform placement commissioning. There is also a lack of a preventive and early intervention service to reduce the need for children becoming looked after. Senior leaders recognised some of these gaps prior to the inspection. Consequently, they are developing a range of proposals as part of the transformation review. While inspectors were able to see some very early evidence of 'edge of care' support being developed, it is too early to demonstrate any impact. (Recommendation)
104. The MALAP provides a strong focus on improving outcomes and achievements for children looked after and care leavers. The membership comprises of key managers who provide support to these groups of children and young people. The panel has a good understanding of the needs of children looked after and care leavers, and the collective work that it and its teams do to support them. This information is checked and updated regularly, and is used to determine swift action when concerns are raised. This collective action is contributing to improving outcomes for children looked after and care leavers.
105. The local authority has invested in training for a number of young people to undertake the role of 'Young Inspectors' to inspect the quality of children's homes, semi-independent accommodation and other services, making recommendations in response to any identified shortfalls.
106. Children and young people looked after are enthusiastic members of Stockton-on-Tees Children in Care Council (CiCC) the 'Let's Take Action' group for children aged 12 to 21 and the 'Positive Activities Group' for children aged five to 12. These groups influence the agenda of the multi-agency children looked after panel and shape service delivery. There are many good examples of how children's and young people's views shape service delivery. For example, wi-fi was installed in children's homes in response to young people's requests after visits by members, and the survey of care leavers resulted in a new independent living programme, attached to residential homes, being commissioned.
107. The groups are well supported by the children's rights officer and have influenced a variety of service developments. These include developing a training DVD on family contact for social workers and foster carers, and developing guides for young people on attending child protection conferences, as well as a range of other actions. The local authority is also

involved in the 'Inspiring voices' project, working with other local authorities to increase the membership and reach of the CiCC.

108. Children and young people from the two CiCC groups designed and created the children looked after pledge. It is written in young person-friendly language and is currently being further developed by young people into an 'emoji pledge', with the use of emoji symbols. This provides a simple message that the local authority will help things to get better when they are not going well. The children's rights officer visits children in external placements, and offers young people an opportunity to be seen alone and to feed back any worries or concerns.
109. Despite the positive work undertaken to ensure wide participation, services to children looked after are underdeveloped, and there is more work to do to ensure that children receive a consistent and timely response. Services provided to care leavers are strong, but there is more to do to realise the local authority's ambition to increase the proportion of care leavers benefiting from apprenticeships that lead to employment.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB)

The Local Safeguarding Children Board requires improvement

Executive summary

The board has very good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. SLSCB meets its statutory functions. It benefits from appropriate multi-agency membership, very good attendance and strong commitment, including from three lay members who bring independent challenge to the board's work. However, the board has lacked thoroughness in aspects of challenge and analyses of some key areas of its purpose. It does not yet have clear mechanisms for analysing, evaluating and collating how partner agencies are ensuring the effectiveness of their practice in respect of some key safeguarding practice. Performance information has been too focused on data and not on the underlying explanations of why performance is good or poor.

Insufficient action has been taken to ensure that thresholds are understood across partner agencies. Furthermore, the 2016–17 joint Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool training programme has been introduced without a full needs analysis, despite under-participation on some courses in 2015–16.

Although the board has commissioned work on the influence and 'voice of the child', it has yet to ensure that this is embedded in the work of the board and across all partner agencies.

A key strength of SLSCB is the work of the sub-groups, especially those working across other Teesside local safeguarding children boards, including the vulnerable, exploited, missing and trafficked group (VEMT), which adds strength and challenge to safeguarding children, the shared procedures sub-group and the child death overview panel (CDOP).

The board has been instrumental in shaping services for children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees, including those for domestic abuse and promoting the safety of children in public settings, and has been influential in the introduction of the multi-agency children's hub.

The annual report 2014–15 lacks rigour. While it includes a great deal of information, it is too lengthy, and does not include sufficient assessment and analysis of performance and effectiveness.

Recommendations

- 110. Ensure that quality assurance and performance management processes provide clear analyses, so that the SLSCB has a clear understanding of the effectiveness of partner agencies.
- 111. Ensure that the joint Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees threshold document is effectively used and understood by partner agencies.
- 112. Ensure that the views of children and young people help to influence the work of the board and the safeguarding practice of all partner agencies.
- 113. Undertake an analysis and evaluation of need to inform the Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool 2017–18 joint training programme.
- 114. Ensure that the annual report for 2015–16 is succinct, and includes a clear analysis of performance and the effectiveness of partner agencies in undertaking their safeguarding functions.

Inspection findings – the Local Safeguarding Children Board

- 115. The board is constituted in line with statutory guidance. Members of the board are committed to promoting the multi-agency shared priorities. Attendance of board members at the monthly meetings is consistent, and this helps to ensure that vital issues are disseminated to partner agencies. The board has three lay members, who provide an independent perspective and challenge. There is a good range of sub-groups to consider and progress strategic areas of safeguarding practice. The sub-groups are well established and attended, and report regularly to the full board on performance, the VEMT, learning and improvement, training, licensing and procedures.
- 116. There are strong governance arrangements across children’s services and key partnerships boards, including the HWB, children and young people’s partnership board and Safer Stockton group. These ensure that the priorities of the SLSCB link to those of these important boards and the overarching priorities of the JSNA. However, the independent chair of the board has identified that the SLSCB business plan and priorities could be better aligned to the JSNA and HWB priorities.
- 117. The independent chair of SLSCB was appointed in April 2016. He is also the independent chair of a neighbouring LSCB and has a very good understanding of his role. The independent chair demonstrates openness and honesty in identifying positive practice of the board, areas for improvement and, importantly, how areas for improvement will be addressed. He is also keen to ensure that the work of the SLSCB is determined by all the representative agencies. Prior to his appointment, SLSCB already had well-established working arrangements. These have been developed further, and the momentum of the board has been intensified by new membership and changes to how meetings are organised,

which are enhancing the quality of discussions and challenge. The board is well-resourced with an appropriate budget, and benefits from a full-time, experienced, board manager who has good administrative support.

118. In 2014–15, only four multi-agency audits were undertaken. Consequently, the board did not have a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of partners in important areas of safeguarding practice. The board recognises this weakness and, to compensate, in 2015–16 a range of thematic reviews were commissioned and reported to the board. These focused on the quality of frontline practice, including child protection plans, casework, initial child protection conference attendance, section 47 enquiries and conference decision-making. These findings, along with learning from serious case reviews and serious incidents, have resulted in an agreed programme of multi-agency auditing for 2016–17. The programme will focus on issues of domestic violence, alcohol and substance misuse, and adult mental health, as these remain significant drivers of the workload in early help and social care, and for all agencies.
119. Other routine reports to the board are provided in respect of private fostering, the designated officer, youth offending, children missing education, children home educated, the work of independent reviewing officers, children living out of the local authority area, children looked after (including care leavers), children missing and the work of the VEMT. The board has a rich source of information from these reports, and there is evidence of board members challenging each other's practice and taking forward the findings to their individual agencies. However, the inspection findings and performance data that were seen indicate that further work is needed to ensure improvements, especially in relation to the quality of care plans, attendance and contributions to reviews, and consistent application of thresholds guidance. Importantly, there is no clear mechanism for the board to monitor and collate information on the effectiveness of all partners in improving these key areas of practice. (Recommendation)
120. The joint Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees threshold document 'Providing the right support to meet a child's needs in Hartlepool and Stockton', launched in February 2016, preceded the introduction of the multi-agency children's hub in June 2016. It was anticipated that the new threshold guidance would result in improved application of thresholds by partners. However, too little emphasis has been given to the launch to ensure that all partner agencies have an appropriate understanding of the thresholds when making referrals to children's social care. There is no mechanism for the board to assess how effective agencies have been in the application of the new guidance. (Recommendation)
121. The current performance dataset consists mainly of children's social care measures, with some information from health and housing partners, and does not include any data in relation to other partner agencies. The dataset includes some benchmarking criteria, but there is no commentary to interpret the data. The limitations of this performance information are acknowledged, and the sub-group recognises a need to include commentary about the data information to gain a clear understanding of the issues underlying

performance. This has the potential to facilitate a more coordinated and effective approach by agencies, for example in understanding thresholds and consequently ensuring that referrals are made appropriately. This approach is intended to link closely to the new performance framework which is being introduced across Teesside.

122. The four Teesside local safeguarding children boards (Hartlepool, Stockton-on-Tees, Middlesbrough, and Redcar and Cleveland) have jointly secured funding from the Department for Education to design and implement a single multi-agency performance management framework and dataset. The ambition is to strengthen performance monitoring and promote better outcomes for children and young people. This is through improved monitoring and accountability of partners to the boards, improved decision-making and prioritisation, efficiency savings and consistency in the type of information collected. However, this framework is new and it is too soon to see any effect.
123. Effective arrangements are in place through the CDOP, which operates across the four Teesside local authorities. The Teesside approach ensures rationalisation of attendance and consistent feedback to individual agencies. In 2015–16, all reviews were undertaken within timescales. The CDOP panel includes a lay representative, which enhances challenge. The panel also benefits from attendance by three paediatric consultants. In 2015–16, only three of 12 child deaths in Stockton-on-Tees were unexpected. There are no specific themes arising from a review of recent children's cases, but the panel is proactive in taking forward learning and in challenging agencies. In 2015–16, this has resulted in important changes to regional services and practice, including improved communication with the coroner, policy changes in respect of instances of retention of placenta and coordinated work in respect of juvenile Huntington's disease. CDOP has also secured funding and reintroduced the rapid response team, which had been suspended in 2015.
124. The overall analysis from the most recent section 11 audits demonstrates that Stockton-on-Tees' partner agencies have a high commitment and application to their responsibilities, outlined in 'Working together to safeguard children 2015'. The standards are being met, in the main, and where agencies have identified that there is room for improvement, the deficiencies are included in their action plans. The rigour of section 11 audits has been enhanced by the establishment of face-to-face peer challenge of audit findings to ensure consistency and fairness in auditing.
125. The SLSCB learning and improvement framework defines and provides the basis for the work of the learning and improvement sub-group. This includes the processes for undertaking serious case reviews (SCRs) and learning reviews of significant incidents. There have been two SCRs published in the past two years, and a further two children's cases are currently being considered to ascertain whether they meet the criteria for a SCR. Learning from SCRs and serious incidents is cascaded effectively through specific training and briefings. Briefings are sent out to staff, and learning events are held where participants are asked to identify the key learning points for their

practice. Training course content is reviewed and changes are made to procedures to reflect learning. Learning from SCRs and reviews has resulted in better awareness and understanding, as well as changes to practice and procedures such as ‘not brought to appointments’, disguised compliance, professional challenge and chronic neglect. The majority of social workers seen by inspectors had a good understanding of the most recently published serious case reviews and awareness of the role of the SLSCB.

126. The procedures sub-group is a Teesside group. It produces and updates procedures, and maintains and updates the SLSCB website. The Teesside approach is good at ensuring consistency of practice, especially where partner agencies operate across the different authorities. A task and finish group reviewed the requirements from ‘Working together to safeguard children 2015’ and has ensured that all procedures are up to date. A further area of good practice is the expectation that every procedure brought to the board for consideration must include a ‘voice of the child’ impact assessment. Policies that have recently been updated include those on allegations management, dual process (child protection and children looked after), female genital mutilation, information sharing, complaints and seeking information from the police. Consideration for changes to procedures come from national guidance and legislation, as well as learning from SCRs, incidents and local issues.
127. The Teesside strategic VEMT sub-group is successful in providing a strong, strategic Teesside partnership to bring together key agencies and organisations to ensure a focus on the most vulnerable children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees. The close cross-boundary working with neighbouring authorities ensures that information, intelligence, identification, disruption and prevention activities are coordinated well, adding value and strength to the safeguarding capacity of agencies in the borough. Each of the four Tees boroughs has a sub-group which sits beneath the VEMT, working to the overarching Teesside strategy. Each sub-group has an individual action plan working to ‘the four P’s’: prevent, pursue, protect and prosecute.
128. The independent chair acknowledges that further work is required to ensure that the ‘voice of the child’ is embedded throughout the SLSCB and within partner agencies. A recently commissioned consultation of children and young people has resulted in some very positive work within children’s services and, consequently, the SLSCB has prioritised the need for further work to embed an approach to the ‘voice of the child’ in its work. This is through a framework which includes expectations for all partner agencies at strategic, operational and individual levels. As part of this work, the independent chair is keen to involve the Stockton-on-Tees ‘Young Inspectors’ in the work of the board. This is to improve communication and to ensure that children’s and young people’s views inform partner agencies’ practice. (Recommendation)
129. The SLSCB’s influence is clearly seen in the commissioning of services, and the development of policies and procedures to safeguard children. The board has been involved in the introduction of Operation ‘Encompass’,

providing early reporting by the police to schools and colleges on any domestic abuse incidents that may have an impact on a child and enabling staff to provide support where needed. The board has also been instrumental in developing 'A safer place for children' guidance, promoting the safety of children in public settings. In addition, the board has been influential in developing the social work model of risk assessment being rolled out across children's services and in early help settings. This is to assess and respond more effectively to cases of neglect. These areas of practice are already reported by partners as having an impact and leading to enhanced outcomes for children. Most significantly, the board has been pivotal in the introduction of the Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool children's hub in June 2016.

130. The Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Local Safeguarding Children Board's training programme for 2016–17 aims to improve communication and information sharing between professionals, including a common understanding of key terms, definitions and thresholds for action. The programme offers a wide range of courses, including online training. The impact of training is measured by distributing evaluation forms to all delegates at the completion of the training. A subsequent evaluation questionnaire is sent out three months later to gather information on the impact of the knowledge acquired. The evaluation concludes that training in 2015–16 has had a positive impact on delegates' knowledge and confidence in dealing with safeguarding matters. However, there has been insufficient analysis of why the take-up of training has been low in some agencies and why there has been a 25% under-participation on some training courses. Consequently, the SLSCB cannot be assured that the current training programme is based upon an accurate needs analysis. (Recommendation)

131. The annual report 2014–15 includes a great amount of detail on the actions and work programme of the board during that period. However, the report is lengthy and lacks a clear analysis of the effectiveness of the board and partners in fulfilling their responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the local area, and in relation to the board's work. (Recommendation)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the local safeguarding children board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of eight of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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