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CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

Day: Wednesday
Date: 18 September 2024
Time: 6.00 pm
Place: Committee Room 1 - Tameside One

Item No.	AGENDA	Page No
10 (i)	COMMISSIONER'S REPORT ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES	1 - 48

This item has been added to the agenda at the request of the Chair. The Chair was of the opinion that the Commissioner's report, although not included on the agenda, should be considered as a matter of urgency in accordance with Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 to enable the Panel to duly consider the Commissioner's report at the earliest available opportunity following its publication on 17 September 2024.

From: Democratic Services Unit – any further information may be obtained from the reporting officer or from Georgia Latham, Scrutiny Manager or Tom Hoghton, Policy & Strategy Service Manager, to whom any apologies for absence should be notified.

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Report To: CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY PANEL

Date: 18 September 2024

Scrutiny Chair / Reporting Officer: Councillor Tilbrook

Subject: COMMISSIONER'S REPORT ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Report Summary: This item has been added to the agenda at the request of the Chair. The Chair was of the opinion that the Commissioner's report, although not included on the agenda, should be considered as a matter of urgency in accordance with Section 100B(4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972 to enable the Panel to duly consider the Commissioner's report at the earliest available opportunity following its publication on 17 September 2024.

Recommendations: That Children's Services Scrutiny Panel receive the report and note the contents.

Links to Corporate Plan: To achieve our priorities:

- Very best start in life where children are ready to learn and encouraged to thrive and develop
- Aspiration and hope through learning and moving with confidence from childhood to adulthood
- Resilient families and supportive networks to protect and grow our young people
- Supports the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan, with a particular focus on the Children's Services Improvement Plan.


Policy Implications: Not applicable.

Financial Implications: Not applicable.
(Authorised by the Section 151 Officer)

Legal Implications: Not applicable.
(Authorised by the Borough Solicitor)

Risk Management: Not applicable.

Access to Information: The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Georgia Latham, Scrutiny Manager by:

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Commissioner's report on children's services in Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council

**Report to the Secretary of State for Education
by Children's Services Commissioner,
Andy Couldrick**

July 2024

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Introduction and Methodology

I was appointed Commissioner in March 2024 due to the persistent inadequacy of Tameside's Children's Services. This appointment followed an Ofsted inspection in December 2023, which rated Tameside's Children's Services as Inadequate, with services for Care Leavers rated as Requires Improvement. This came after a prior Inadequate rating in 2016, and two Areas for Priority Action identified during a Focused Visit in 2022. The Terms of reference for my review are at Appendix 1. The requirement of me as Commissioner is as follows:

- To issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the Council's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
- To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the Council.
- To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the Council, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the Council and key partners.
- To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by July 2024.

To do this, I have held more than 80 meetings, with over 150 people: parents and carers, young people with care experience, frontline practitioners, first line and middle managers, service leaders, senior Council officers, local elected members and national politicians, service leaders in neighbouring authorities, and partners from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

I have observed key partnership boards including the Tameside Safeguarding Children Partnership, the SEND Local Area Partnership and the Children's Improvement Board, as well as the Children's Scrutiny Committee. I have also met with the National Safeguarding Panel and with officials in DfE and MHCLG.

I have, in the course of the work, read and reviewed over one hundred plans, policies, reports, meeting notes and reviews.

Everyone with whom I have spoken has been frank and open with me, and I have received excellent support from Tameside in carrying out my review.

Executive Summary

Children's Services in Tameside have been too weak for too long.

This report sets out the key elements that need to be addressed to effect the necessary improvements:

- a strong corporate Council able to provide support, scrutiny and challenge in order to create the conditions for services to thrive;
- a stable, focused and collaborative service leadership and practice leadership;
- a stable workforce, equipped and trained to deliver a consistent model of practice, with strong quality assurance and performance management;
- consistent improved social work practice;
- partnerships with key statutory and voluntary sector agencies that reflect the collaborative nature of the task of delivering services to children.

The report sets out significant weaknesses in all of these areas.

The overall picture is of an authority unable to effect sustained improvement over a considerable period. This is largely because the Council has failed to recruit and retain strong leaders and a sufficiently stable workforce. The Council has neither enabled good services nor had mechanisms in place to spot service failure.

As Ofsted recognised in December 2023, the leaders brought in last summer have begun to introduce systematic improvement, but it is still uneven and there is much work to do in the service and in the Council.

As well as new Children's Services leaders, the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council are relatively new in post; while they demonstrate a commitment to service improvement, there is also a reluctance to accept responsibility collectively and corporately for the long-term service failure.

A review of previous Ofsted recommendations and areas for improvement highlight weaknesses in political, corporate, and senior leadership and weaknesses in social work practice and the leadership of practice as recurring themes since 2016.

It is my view that the Council currently does not have the capacity and capability to effect the necessary and sustainable improvements in Children's Services without oversight and support.

The Council, corporate and political, is quick to blame for failure: individuals, frontline staff, partners, advisors, Government departments. There is far less reflection as to its own role to enable successful service delivery, know how services are performing, deliver tailored corporate support, or recognise its collective accountability. Children's Services failure does not happen in a vacuum: high-performing councils deliver strong services.

I have made a number of important recommendations which, if implemented, will significantly improve the prospects of substantial and sustainable improvement in the

services Tameside Council provides to its most vulnerable children, young people, and families.

About Tameside

Locality

The Borough of Tameside lies to the East of Greater Manchester, stretching eastwards from the urban hub of Manchester to the moors of the Peak District. Tameside shares borders with Oldham, Manchester, Stockport, and the Derbyshire Borough of High Peak. Tameside is well connected to the region and beyond by the M60 and M67 motorways and quality rail links to Manchester and Yorkshire.

Population

According to the latest census data Tameside had a population of 231,073 in 2021. The borough's population is equal to approximately 9.1% of Greater Manchester's population. Of the population, 144,600 (62.94%) were of working age (16-64); 45,900 were aged between 0-15 years (19.85%); and 40,470 were aged 65 or over (17.561%).

Tameside has a slightly older population than average, the highest proportion of residents being between 50-54, compared to England where the highest proportion are between 30-34.

49% of Tameside's residents are male, 51% are female. Less than 0.05% of Tameside's population are non-binary. 94.7% of the population state that their gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth.

90.8% of Tameside residents identify as straight or heterosexual; 1.8% identify as gay or lesbian; all other sexual orientations make up 1.4% of the population (5.9% declined to answer).

Ethnicity

Tameside's population is predominantly White, accounting for 90.9% of the population. 6.65% of the population are Asian; 1.4% are Mixed; 0.08% Black; and 0.2% of the population are other ethnicities.

The main language in Tameside is English (94.1%), the next most used languages are Urdu (1%), Polish (0.9%), and Bengali (0.7%).

Demography

Life Expectancy for men in Tameside is 75.8 (78.7 nationally) and Healthy Life expectancy is 61.6 (63.1 nationally). For women, Life Expectancy is 80.5 (82.8 nationally) and 58.2 (63.9 nationally) for Healthy Life Expectancy.

Employment and Education

Tameside has an employment rate of 57.1%. The largest employment sector in Tameside are wholesale and retail trades, and repair of motor vehicles and

motorcycles (16.9%). Followed by human health and social work activities (15.4%), and manufacturing (9.5%).

28.5% of Tameside's jobs pay below the Living Wage (compared to 20.75% in Greater Manchester). The median annual income in Tameside is £27,706.

24.4% of residents hold an NVQ level 4 qualification or above.

Tameside has 77 primary schools, 16 secondary schools, 8 special schools, and 4 colleges/sixth forms. 90.8% of Tameside's primary schools are Good or Outstanding, 66.7% of Tameside's secondary schools are Good or Outstanding.

According to the latest census data, as their highest qualification; 11.25% of the population has a Level 1 qualification, 15.2% Level 2, 6.9% Apprenticeship, 17.7% Level 3, 24.4% Level 4 or above, 21.8% have no qualifications, 2.7% have other qualifications.

The borough's percentage of residents with no academic qualifications is higher than the England percentage at 18.1%.

66.9% of children at the Early Years Foundation Stage are achieving a Good level of development, compared to 71.8% national average.

In Tameside, 75% of pupils met the expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 (2019).

Poverty and Deprivation

41.1% of Tameside's children are living in poverty in 2022/23 (relative poverty, after housing costs), compared with 30% nationally (end child poverty.org). Tameside is ranked as the 28th most deprived of 317 Local Authority districts in England, and the 5th most deprived in Greater Manchester. 11 of the borough's Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) are in the most deprived 5% of LSOAs nationally.

Housing

The most common tenure in the borough is owned outright (30.5%), while the remaining are owned with a mortgage (30.3%), social rents (21.2%), private rents (17.5%), shared ownerships (0.3%), and living rent free (0.1%).

The most common dwelling type in Tameside is semi-detached (38.6%) followed by Terraced (34.1%), flats or tenement (12.9%), detached (12%), and other (2.4%).

4.1% of households experience bedroom overcrowding.

Background: The Council

Tameside Council is comprised of 58 elected members: currently 49 Labour; 7 Conservative; 2 Independent. The Leader of the Council has held the position since May 2022. His Deputy Leader has held the Children's Services portfolio since 2019.

The Council operates the Executive and Scrutiny system. Dedicated Scrutiny for Children's Services is a recent addition, introduced over a year ago.

The Council's leadership team comprises Chief Executive and five roles:

- Director, Population Health (DPH)
- Director, Adult Services (DASS)
- Director, Children's Services (DCS)
- Director of Resources (S.151)
- Assistant Director, People and Workforce Development

Except for the DCS, all the posts are permanent. The Chief Executive has worked in Tameside for thirty years, having previously been Monitoring Officer. She is also Director of the Greater Manchester Pension Fund. She became Chief Executive in June 2022.

The current DCS has been in Tameside since July 2023, initially offering strategic support to the previous DCS. The former DCS left Tameside following an external review of the social care 'front door,' which found it unsafe and urgently needing improvement. In September 2023, the current DCS assumed the role on an interim basis, committed to overseeing the necessary improvements. The DCS has two Assistant Directors, one for Social Care, one for Education. Both are interim appointments (at the time of writing one of these posts was offered as a permanent role to the interim candidate; I have addressed this in my report).

The Council is executing ambitious regeneration plans across the nine towns that constitute the borough. There is great ambition to deliver for the borough and its people. A Corporate Peer Challenge took place in January to explore the Council's capacity to deliver further change and improvement across the Council.

Amongst its recommendations was the need for a refreshed Corporate Plan, and with it an organisational improvement plan through which changes and improvement could be better owned and governed within the Council. It also recommended that some external senior capacity was brought in to support and hasten the change sought by the Council.

The new Corporate Plan, approved by Council in March, reflects the priority now afforded to the Council's services for children and families, with improvement in social care and SEND prominent. It is, by definition, a high-level plan, and needs the detail of improvement and action plans beneath it to enable the Council to track and report its progress.

The Council is working with an external organisation to help drive its transformation intent. This consultancy is also supporting improvement in the costs of care for

children and in the SEND space. I am aware that this work was not commissioned by the leadership team in Children's Services. Its traction to date is mixed: it is supporting improving care planning for Cared for Children, and in turn value for money, but their work in the SEND space is more challenging currently. The Council's financial plan is, in part, built on the presumption of success in relation to reducing the costs of care.

Ofsted Reports and Recommendations

The table below sets out the results of Ofsted inspections of Children's Services in Tameside since 2016:

Inspection Type	Outcome
2016 Full Inspection	Inadequate
2019 Full Inspection	Requires Improvement
2022 Focused Visit	2 Areas for Priority Action
2023 Full Inspection	Inadequate

Source of data: Ofsted Website

In Appendix 2, I have set out the inspection outcomes and grouped them by theme. This illustrates that weaknesses in political, corporate, and senior leadership and weaknesses in social work practice and the leadership of practice have been recurring themes since 2016. Weakness in partnership and multi-agency arrangements, strategic and operational, is a similarly repeating theme.

Ofsted will undertake a series of monitoring visits between now and the date of the next full ILACS inspection, starting in September, when the service front door, including the MASH, will be the focus.

Children's Services: key issues and priorities

Tameside Children's Services faces many challenges, across social care and SEND. Services have deteriorated over time and, as for the Council as a whole, there are systemic and cultural issues that need concerted attention so that Children's Services benefit from the impact of a positive, high support high challenge corporate and political culture.

A common complaint from staff and frontline managers has been that their direction is constantly changing. They are told to do things one way by one leader or manager, only for them to leave and a new one arrive telling them to do it in a different way. Staff describe feeling, at times, bewildered and criticised for their practice when leaders have consistently failed to create and sustain a way of working that everyone can understand, endorse and operationalise. Service leaders now recognise that they must implement a practice model that becomes properly understood, embedded, and sustained, regardless of changes in leadership. The '5Cs' model being rolled out is sound and must be maintained.

This links to the next key issue. Building a permanent workforce is critical for the Council. Current, and recent, levels of churn and turnover, at every tier of leadership and management make improvement virtually impossible and significantly damage the morale of the workforce. The most recent data I have seen points to a rise in the number of staff leaving social care, and an agency social worker rate of close to 40%. This trend must be arrested and turned around urgently.

Once the leadership and the workforce begin to stabilise, the development of practice leaders becomes a priority. This works best when all leaders, from team manager to DCS, undertake a similar programme so that consistency, coherence, and clarity can be brought to the leadership of practice against the new framework and standards.

The rate of children in care is much higher than it should be: 127 per 10,000, compared with a statistical neighbour average of 98 per 10,000. The Council has made an impressive start in discharging Care Orders for children living with their parents and has a programme of work pursuing Special Guardianship Orders for children permanently placed with relatives or long-term carers. The rate at which children are ceasing care is above the regional average.

However, the rate of admission into care continues to be above the average. This highlights the lack of clarity in how thresholds are understood and applied in Tameside to support decision-making in the Council and with partners. I address this in the next section of my report.

There are also too many children in residential care. Fostering recruitment has been weak and placement choice is too limited. Like many authorities and trusts, Tameside is managing the care of a small number of young people with extreme needs and challenging behaviour for whom regulated placements are often not available.

Getting these fundamental issues right will lead, over time, to greater confidence that vulnerable children in Tameside receive a response proportionate to their needs, and

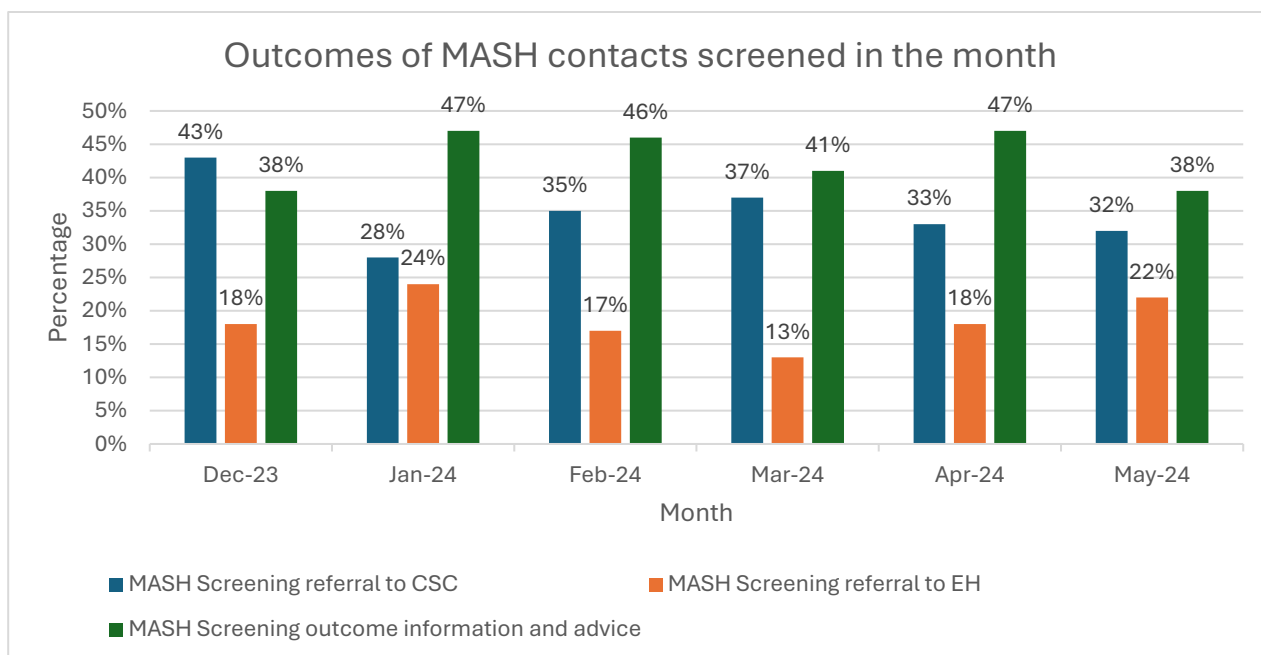
that they are in the right part of the system for the right reasons and for the right amount of time. As this happens, the cost of the service will start to fall. Tameside is working with a consultancy to accelerate the process of getting better outcomes and better value in Tameside's care system. There are no 'quick fixes' that can be applied to the financial challenge Tameside faces. To reverse the financial trend, it is crucial to establish clear and well-understood thresholds, provide the appropriate preventative services at the right time and to the right families, increase family placement capacity (with children's families always being the first consideration), and ensure consistent care and permanence planning. This can be done, as it has been elsewhere.

Quality of Practice

Early Help has been through several iterations and leadership changes in recent years. A stable model has not been implemented nor had time to embed. There is a lack of clarity across the partnership about whose responsibility Early Help is, and who should undertake Early Help Assessments. A partially implemented 'Team around Schools and Settings' was popular in the areas where it worked, but was withdrawn, prior to full roll-out, at the point the EHASH model was ended.

Ofsted rightly recognised a strong offer based on sound assessments for families accessing Early Help. However not enough families are benefitting. Recent data (up to April 2024) published by the NW ADCS demonstrates that the rate of Early Help Assessments in Tameside is 161 per 10,000, against the regional average of 256 per 10,000. Early Help is important to assist families to solve their challenges, avoiding the need to escalate to a referral into social care. The same NW ADCS data demonstrates this is not happening in Tameside: alongside the low rate of Early Help Assessments is a higher-than-average rate of referral into social care: 727 referrals per 10k, compared with the average across the region of 517.

A recent Peer Review of Early Help found that the ingredients for a strong Early Help offer were in place, but resources were neither well planned nor targeted. Early Help Assessments take too long and are completed at a comparatively low rate. Early Help resources are currently stretched, necessarily, to support families who have a social worker (children in need, with child protection plans). The table below illustrates the high number of contacts to the MASH leading to step down to Early Help or the provision of information and advice (source: TMBC).



Too many Early Help requests run through the MASH in a process that is inefficient and unnecessarily complicated. This leads to a higher volume of work passing

through the MASH, raising the risk that critical cases requiring a MASH safeguarding response might be overlooked or lost amid the increased workload. This was at the heart of the problem of the previous 'EHASH' model, replaced in summer 2023.

A Review by experienced external consultants is in train, leading to a delivery and improvement plan for the MASH. Theirs is a tried and tested model nationally.

When I met the consultants, they expressed concern about the implementation of the new model for the MASH in Tameside. None of the system conditions for the change have been put in place (training; information-sharing arrangements; routine securing of consent in cases where it was needed; IT support). Poor planning leads to the MASH often operating at 50% capacity. Staff have proven reluctant to adopt the new model and a combination of distant senior leadership and changing line managers (very recent management appointments are having some positive impact) has led to poor and partial implementation. The service leaders now need to grip these issues and rapidly create the conditions that allow change in the MASH to embed.

The consultants expressed concern that the current arrangements are not as safe and secure as they need to become. They stated that they had been asked to implement their model in Tameside's MASH quickly – in 4 months. Their usual implementation is 12 months or more.

The scale of change being undertaken does not lend itself to accelerated implementation, and certainly not in Tameside at this point. The changes being sought are the right ones. Tameside must take the time it needs to effect a sound and sustainable implementation: one that embeds smart processes and systems, is led by experienced managers and social workers committed to and familiar with the model, and that is properly integrated with partners from Police, Education and Health. Critically, performance dashboards need to be in place providing real time information to managers on demand and performance.

In July, I wrote to the Council to seek the Director's assurance as to the safe operation of the MASH. Appropriate assurances were provided.

Strategy meetings are now taking place in Tameside in a more timely manner, and are better attended by partner agencies. This increasingly ensures that information is shared effectively and investigations are better planned and executed.

Too many children are being assessed by Tameside, with too few receiving help. Tameside's own data, below, illustrates that 73% of assessments completed lead to no further action from social care, a small proportion diverted to Early Help, more given information, and advice.

Table showing reasons for closure of referrals in Tameside.

Referral Closure Reason	% of closures
Child deemed not to be in need after assessment	70.6%
Services ceased for any other reason including child no longer in need	22.7%
RC9 - Case closed after assessment, referred to early help	4.3%
Transferred to services of another LA	1.7%
Referral Closed as part of Data Cleansing	0.3%
Adopted	0.1%
Child Arrangements Order	0.1%
Died	0.1%
Special Guardianship Order	0.1%
Transferred to adult social services	0.1%

In addition, too many children are being re-referred into the MASH, and too many are subject to repeat assessments.

All of this data suggests strongly the need for a fundamental review and re-establishment of thresholds in Tameside, for Children's Services staff in Early Help and the MASH, and with partners who are generating contacts, referrals and re-referrals.

A strong, well-functioning 'front door' for children's social care has to be dealing with the right levels of need and risk at the right time with the right intervention. Too many children come through Tameside's 'front door', making those critically important cases in need of an urgent safeguarding response much harder to find.

Assessments are too descriptive, insufficiently analytic, reflective, and too slow; the majority take 45 days or longer. Recent changes in the leadership and management of the Duty and Assessment service are beginning to bring much greater focus and compliance, albeit with more to do to improve the quality and consistency of assessment practice.

Action has been taken to improve child protection planning since the inspection. Teams are marginally more stable, meaning fewer changes in social worker for families. The need for a clear practice framework is acutely clear in this area of Tameside's work. Some use of Signs of Safety has continued, but it is partial and inconsistent. Management grip has begun to improve, and there is greater scrutiny now of performance and the quality of child protection planning. There is much to do to embed the new framework and standards of practice.

The role of Child Protection Chairs to quality assure practice and to escalate concerns about practice has been under-developed. There is a concern that chairs, historically, have not escalated the right issues and that their escalations have frequently been ignored by operational teams. Work is in train to address both issues.

Services for Cared for Children in Tameside were rightly criticised by Ofsted. There has been a longstanding absence of good care planning for children; consequently, too many children have been subject to drift and delay without effective planning. Effective permanence planning has been absent for too many children. Independent Reviewing Officers have been unable to address drift and delay; when they have raised issues they have often been ignored, without effective escalation routes.

While the Cared for Children teams have experienced less churn than other parts of the service, this has not meant standards of practice have been higher.

Since the new leadership has been in place, impressive progress has been made in improving permanence through a project focused on Special Guardianship Orders as a better alternative to Care Orders, and also seeking Care Order discharges for children living with their parents (but subject to Care Orders).

There has been substantial change more recently in the Cared for Children service, with a new (interim and experienced) Head of Service and turnover at Team Manager level. This does perpetuate the culture of uncertainty and 'temporariness' but it is bringing a sharper focus on performance, permanence, and practice.

Tameside provides a Contextual Safeguarding service jointly with Greater Manchester Police. Ofsted recognised the quality of its work. It is a beacon of good practice in Tameside currently, built on the foundations of stability, effective leadership and management, and a clear operating model. Work is underway with Greater Manchester Police to address the volume of Missing Children reports received by the Police about children in care in Tameside. It is a complex issue given the considerable number of independent children's homes in the borough, as well as a significant number of children in the care of other local authorities. A combination of strategic and operational partnership work is required to find an effective and pragmatic solution that keeps children safe.

The Fostering service was criticised in the ILACS inspection. Staff with whom I met described a familiar context for the problems identified: they felt let down by senior leaders who were largely invisible until the changes in summer 2023. They described inconsistent policies and procedures that, when combined with absent leadership and management, led to staff finding their own ways of doing things, baking in further inconsistent practice. A basic understanding by managers of the Fostering Regulations was absent.

More recently, improvements have begun, albeit from a low base. Procedures and standard processes are being established. Compliance is increasing. Recruitment has been streamlined with a consequent uptick in the number of carers coming through the assessment process. Strong leadership is being provided by an experienced Head of Service who is driving up standards.

Within the Fostering service, staff repeatedly reiterated the need for policies, procedures and processes being put in place to be supported to continue and embed, irrespective of any further changes in leadership in Tameside. Foundations are being established that need to be sustained and built upon. Doing so will also lead to service compliance with the Fostering Regulations.

Tameside currently operates five children's homes: one of these is a resource for children with physical and/or learning difficulties. This offers, when fully functioning, a mix of long-term and short breaks care. Currently, the homes are rated by Ofsted as follows: one 'Good', one 'Requires Improvement' and two 'Inadequate' (one currently closed).

I visited two of the homes during my review and found some very impressive practice. Both homes benefitted from strong, stable, and connected leadership, a stable staff team, an established practice framework adopted by everyone, and real commitment to the young people in their care. One of the homes is doing good work in a building that is unfit for purpose. There are plans for a new-build replacement, which is positive but long overdue; meanwhile the staff have found ways to make the building work and provide exemplary care for young people with significant needs.

There are familiar features of the homes recently rated 'Inadequate': no Registered Manager, an unstable staff team and a lack of consistency of care. A significant issue, identified by the regulator, has been the direction from a senior leader to admit young people to the home when both the Registered Manager and Responsible Individual were clear the admissions would be inappropriate. The managers were proved to be right in their judgement. In terms both of regulation and culture, the direction was, in my judgement, wrong.

Changes were made in summer 2023 to the Care Leaver service, prompted in part by a visit from DfE's National Advisor. The change meant that social workers in the Cared for Children team continued to work with young people post-16, whereas previously a change in lead professional was imposed at this point. The new model means fewer changes for young people, has given Leaving Care personal advisors more capacity, and has led to service improvement. It has had an impact in the Cared for Children teams that needs to be understood.

The Local Offer is being revised. Personal Advisors raised a concern that the new offer includes an independence grant that is described as 'up to' £3000. Their view is that this requires expenditure to be justified rather than provided as an entitlement grant. There is also a concern that the model penalises care-experienced young people in work. This is something the Service may wish to review.

Adoption services are delivered through the Regional Adoption Agency, Adoption Now, established in 2017 and comprised of 6 Greater Manchester local authorities. The service is rated 'Good'. The drift and delay for children in Tameside's care has an impact on planning for adoption for children, as does the churn in the workforce leading to changes in social worker and the consequent challenge in progressing plans.

Tameside's commissioning activity is increasingly impactful. They are active participants in significant, and potentially beneficial, Greater Manchester programmes around residential care expansion, joint commissioning and fostering recruitment. Focus has increased on the need for more family-based placements and a reduction of the previous reliance on residential care. It is important that the Council maintains its engagement with the regional projects as they develop.

Service Leadership

The current Director of Children's Services and Assistant Director, Social Care commenced their tenure at a difficult point in time, around the independent review that found the front door and MASH to be significantly weak and unsafe. This led to rapid change in the senior leadership and to the current DCS taking up the position. They were subsequently joined by an experienced Education Assistant Director.

Tameside's Children's Services leaders are working on a number of fronts to improve services at pace: social care and SEND services have long failed to operate to a good enough standard. Key partnership relationships, with Health, Police, and schools, need rebuilding, operationally and strategically.

Staff describe leaders in the past as distant, remote and invisible. They describe changes in leadership and management as happening without explanation. They clearly articulate the negative impact of the perpetual changes in line management and the ways of doing things: new leaders and managers each bring a different model of working, only for them to leave, and change to happen all over again. It is clear that lines of sight for leaders through to activity at the front line of practice were not there or not clear. Leaders did not know or understand the weakness of their services to children and families.

Staff also describe a 'brutal' regime, where senior leaders have been exited from the organisation as a rapid response to an adverse review or inspection. This has created a strong sense of unease, uncertainty and 'frozen watchfulness' in the workforce.

A protracted period of stable leadership is a prerequisite to service improvement now. While the DCS and one of the Assistant Directors are 'interim', they have expressed a determination to stay to see improvement through. Tameside MBC needs to act to make this happen. The other Assistant Director was appointed to a permanent position during this review. I have addressed this issue below.

The current DCS and her team have worked hard to make themselves visible and more connected to the workforce. Interactive webinars routinely attract large audiences; staff conferences and awards take place regularly; Good Practice Breakfasts, celebrating success and good work have been introduced; acknowledgment and recognition feature in the Chief Executive's weekly briefings; and leaders regularly 'walk the floor' engaging informally with staff, particularly in Tameside One, the building where service leaders and many social work teams are based.

Staff routinely reflected that these measures are contributing to a sense of positive change. They say that standards and expectations are becoming clearer, as is the model of practice, 'the 5Cs', and leaders are now more approachable.

The Practice Model is held in a restorative and trauma-informed frame, and focuses on the 5 Cs of Conversation, Curiosity, Consideration, Collaboration and Courage.

The next step will be to roll out the tools and the training to make the model real for staff.

The DCS has developed a sensible 'Brilliant at the Basics' programme that concentrates on the key building blocks of good practice: Assessments, Plans, Summaries, Chronologies, Visits (timeliness, compliance, quality), Voice of the Child and Supervision, Management and Oversight.

A new Performance and Assurance Framework has also been introduced. This appears to be an effective tool for managing and assuring performance and quality through a cycle of audit and evaluation and performance monitoring. The framework starts with first line managers and aggregates up to become a means for holding senior leaders to account for the performance and quality delivered by their areas. The model provides regular detailed reporting on progress, performance and key issues and challenges by team managers. It provides helpful granular detail and affords leaders the intelligence to spot problems early, to get close to the detail when needed, and to monitor improvement.

Together, these are the building blocks that will improve social work practice in Tameside, so long as they are implemented well and not changed. Leaders and managers of practice need to be equipped with the skills they need to bring the workforce with them, champion good practice, challenge poor practice and drive improvement.

The reporting cycle feeds into the Children's Improvement Board. The necessary intelligence about performance, challenges and priorities is now available to enable the corporate council to see and understand what is happening in Children's Services. It can hold leaders to account, and spot evidence of emerging challenges whether of demand or quality. The centre now needs to understand how to use the available information, to replicate it for other services and through this establish a meaningful and impactful corporate performance and quality reporting cycle. This needs to happen urgently to engender a greater sense of collective, corporate accountability to replace the individualising and blaming that is prominent now.

Morale and confidence in Children's Services are still low. It is a lived experience for Tameside staff and partners alike, that people seem to disappear from the organisation without explanation. This has usually been a combination of people moved on due to issues about performance and/or conduct, and those who have chosen to leave – in significant numbers over the past nine months. This creates speculation amongst staff as to 'who is next?' and concern that 'it might be me'. Staff have experienced senior leaders being critical of individuals in front of others, including more junior staff. This ripples through the service and mitigates against the expressed intent to build engagement, openness, and participation in the process of improvement.

Leaders must be sensitive to this in the way that they lead. Training is being rolled out in Restorative Practice: leaders must manifest this 'high challenge, high support' way of working in all they do to build confidence and courage in the workforce. With this courage comes the willingness to raise concerns and escalate matters: through this the safety of the organisation increases.

The Council has launched the STRIVE programme: a development initiative for managers across the organization. Participants have praised it; it is a positive addition to the Council's development offerings. However, while necessary, it is not sufficient on its own for leaders in social care practice (including all managers, from first-line supervisors to the Director of Children's Services). A dedicated practice development programme is needed to reinforce effective practice leadership and ensure the successful implementation of the new practice model.

One of the important checks and balances built into Children's Services is the role of Child Protection Chairs and Independent Reviewing Officers. Between them they have oversight over the protection and care plans of every child in the system. They can, and should, play an important role in assuring and challenging the quality of practice. They have not done this effectively. They have not prevented weak child protection practice, nor substantial drift and delay in care planning for Cared for Children in Tameside.

Two dynamics are reportedly present: first, it is said that Chairs and IROs have not escalated the right issues; secondly Chairs and IROs experience their escalations being ignored by social workers and managers. The evidence suggests both are true. It is urgent that leaders continue to build a culture that welcomes and expects challenge and escalation, and that, through the Brilliant at the Basics programme, agreement is reached as to when escalation is appropriate and expected, and about what issues. Any escalation represents a professional colleague's concern for a vulnerable child and should be used judiciously and greeted respectfully.

Tameside has implemented a number of panels as a means of establishing clearer processes for decision-making. These appear to have been successful in that regard, but they have proliferated. One group of staff counted fourteen panels, including those which are statutory requirements. Leaders need to review the enduring requirement for them all going forward.

A new structure for the leadership and management of Children's Services has been agreed. It introduces a third Assistant Director, with responsibilities including Early Help, MASH, Duty and Assessment and Youth Partnership, and includes a Head of Quality Assurance reporting directly to the DCS. It is a sensible structure that creates balance in senior portfolios and groups services logically. Adopting it enables the process of permanent recruitment to get underway.

Workforce

The Children's Services workforce is characterised by churn and a significant over-reliance on temporary, interim and agency staff, as the following table exemplifies:

Table showing the number and proportion of agency staff in Tameside, according to job role.

Job Role	Permanent FTE	Number of Agency Workers	Agency as a % of all Workers
DCS/ADs	0	3	100%
Heads of Service	4.5	7	60.9%
Service Unit Manager (SUM)	11.2	6	34.8%
Team Manager	36	15	29.4%
Senior Practitioner	19	39	67.2%
Social Worker	93	56	37.7%

At 37.7%, the rate of agency social workers is the highest it has been in a year but it is an enduring issue. The Ofsted inspection of 2016 identified the high level of turnover in the children's workforce as a feature of its inadequacy. Eight years on, the Council has not effectively addressed the issue, and the rate has risen further in July.

This impacts directly, and significantly, on Tameside's children in need of help from a social worker: around a third of children have had three or more social workers. A prominent feature in one of the cases referred by the current DCS to the National Safeguarding Panel, a case of substantial and chronic neglect, was that the family had 17 social workers in 18 months.

Similarly, the turnover in leadership and management creates problems, driving up the turnover of frontline practitioners. Many social workers describe the pattern in Tameside of a constantly changing practice model, where new managers come in and change 'the way we do things', often departing shortly thereafter. This makes it virtually impossible to establish and embed an improved quality of social work practice with children and families.

A quarter of Tameside's social workers are newly qualified ASYEs (Assessed and supported Year in Employment). This is positive in building a sustainable future workforce, with one caveat: they need to be well supported, with suitable supervision, support, and development opportunities. Most authorities build social work academies to provide this, and to go on to offer a supported second and third year in practice. Tameside only began this when the current DCS arrived, and she is being creative in developing the academy, combining its leadership with the Principal Social Worker role.

Most of the ASYEs reported that they feel well supported in their teams and by their managers and have a manageable caseload. This has not been the case historically: ASYEs have not enjoyed the support and protection they need to grow

professionally. The consequence of this is that they are less likely to stay in the authority. The emerging SW Academy is a critical part of the infrastructure Tameside needs to build to begin to have an appealing offer to attract and to retain social workers.

Two thirds of the children's workforce have 2+ years' experience; a quarter has 10 years' experience. Historic turnover rates amongst social workers have been relatively low but are currently much higher. This is both a feature of Inadequate authorities, but also a consequence of being rated Inadequate. The Greater Manchester region is competitive; Tameside's terms and conditions are not the best in the region so its social workers will always be tempted to move elsewhere. Tameside needs to be confident it is doing everything it can to market and sell itself, creating a compelling and appealing narrative about working in Tameside and to offer an attractive and competitive development package for staff.

I have received clear feedback from staff about their experiences in Tameside. Most describe inconsistent leadership and management, leading to constant shifts in practice models and direction. Many also mention former senior leaders who were remote, often unseen, and for some, even unknown. This has created a palpable sense of anxiety that the turnover will persist. However, the current leaders of Children's Services are reported by many to be more visible and approachable. They have made real efforts to build connection with the workforce and this is recognised by staff.

Exit interviews suggest staff are still citing workload, poor management, and a sense of a lack of safety as reasons for leaving. Leaders have much more to do to build a sense of security and safety back into the social care workforce. They will do this by maintaining visibility, rolling out the '5C's' practice model, building the academy to provide the right development for all staff, including ASYEs, and by leading in a consistent and restorative manner.

Governance, Accountability, Corporate Support and Challenge

The services a Council delivers are not external to the corporate centre. They are what the Council exists to deliver. The role, therefore, of the corporate centre is to challenge and hold to account, certainly, but in equal measure to support and enable good services to be delivered, good value for money to be achieved, and good outcomes for its residents to result.

In discussing the causes and context of failure of children's services with the Council, routinely, the narrative is based on blame: individuals, frontline staff, partners, advisors, Government departments. There is far less reflection as to its own role and responsibility to enable successful service delivery, know how services are performing, deliver tailored corporate support, or recognise its collective accountability. As such, Children's Services acts as an early warning sign of broader service failure: high-performing councils do not have inadequate Children's Services.

As the history of inspection outcomes illustrates, there is long-term failure at a corporate, political, and senior leadership level to create the conditions that enable Children's Services to succeed. More is needed, beyond financial investment, from the Council to demonstrate a new commitment to service improvement, and to put in place the mechanisms to effectively monitor and oversee service performance. A council cannot be considered 'successful' if it is failing its most vulnerable citizens.

A Children's Improvement Board is in place, chaired independently by a very skilled and experienced Children's Services Advisor (previously a DCS in an Outstanding authority). This Board is beginning to gain some traction under the Chair in holding the Council and partners to account for the improvement work that is needed. However, participation and engagement is partial and some who attend have expressed the view that challenge and 'bad news' are unwelcome to Tameside's leaders.

Partners have described being blamed by the Council when challenging issues have arisen that require a system response, and/or a negotiation and a compromise to move forward. Partners also report on the scale of change in personnel in Children's Services but have been largely unaware of the context or circumstances leading to changes. Consequently, the gross failures in the MASH identified last summer, for example, appear never to have been adequately shared or discussed with partners, despite MASH being an obvious multi-agency partnership service.

There certainly has been financial investment in Children's Services: the recent peer challenge identified that TMBC spends an average of £200 more per head of population on Children's Services than comparable authorities. This contrasts with previous inspections (for example, 2016) where Tameside was criticised for its lack of investment in key services. I have addressed elsewhere (Section 6) the challenge Tameside faces in reshaping the profile of its expenditure.

I have been left with a powerful sense of a Council slow to spot, and slower still to accept responsibility for, its weaknesses and challenges. These failures have not been caused by individuals, nor by the actions of partners. They are caused by an organisation that has failed to establish the conditions for good children's services to thrive, that has not sought the right advice and support, or not used it well. This must change under the relatively new political and corporate leadership. Commissioning the Peer Challenge, the review last summer into the operation of the MASH (albeit there is disagreement as to whether this was commissioned by the Chief Executive or by the previous DCS), and commissioning an experienced Adults Director to review and support inspection readiness in Adults Services, are all recent positive signs of a will to use external support to help improvement.

I cannot ignore issues relating to the culture in the Council. Many staff and partners have frequently used similar words to describe the culture, including 'fear', 'bullying', 'intimidating', 'toxic'. There is nervousness to speak out. People have observed leaders responding badly to poor performance or to challenge. They have also seen significant staff and managers 'disappear' without explanation, so they have become less likely to risk raising issues themselves. If this has the effect of suppressing escalation and inviting only good news, then the organisation continues to be, and to feel, unsafe and unreliable. There is a significant task for the leaders of Tameside to reset culture and relationships, to build trust and confidence within the Council and with some important partners. Achieving this will support the ambition the Council has to transform itself and its communities.

Several individuals suggested that some leaders attend important partnership meetings (such as the Improvement Board and SEND LAP) not primarily to contribute, but to ensure that nothing inappropriate is said and nobody veers "off message". This was not universally recognised but, whether true or not, the perception betrays a sense of unease in the borough about addressing the challenges faced honestly and openly – a prerequisite to effective progress. Again, this needs to be addressed under the new leadership.

Managers have described the provision of corporate support to Children's Services (HR, Finance etc) as committed and well-meaning, but traditional and inefficient and having to follow rules and procedures that mitigate against pace and rapid improvement. Recruitment and support for transformation require innovation, creativity and nimbleness, and experience. The Workforce Board that oversees HR activity in Children's Services is well-attended and has gathered important data about the workforce. Beyond that it has yet to have any significant impact. The instability and churn in Children's Services is not replicated elsewhere in the Council: Adult Services, for example has a much more stable workforce. This requires that the corporate services are able to flex and innovate to tackle the very particular recruitment and retention issues in Children's Services.

During my review, I have heard examples of recruitment practice that fall a long way short of what I would expect to see. In one, a very senior permanent appointment in Children's Services was made; this was apparently by the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director responsible for HR, without reference to the statutory Director of Children's Services (and counter to their clear advice to delay permanent recruitment

decisions pending receipt of the Commissioner's report) and without any competitive process.

It is self-evident that senior appointments are critical in an inadequate service. Regardless of the strength of any internal interim candidate, best practice is to test them against a field through external advertising of the role. It is equally important that the Director with statutory responsibility is a key decision-maker.

The reporting and oversight of service performance into the corporate leadership team has not been sufficient to identify and arrest decline. The Peer Challenge recognised the need for an organisational improvement plan. A performance system and framework that enables key risks is needed, both relating to demand and to performance, to be flagged, spotted and responded to much earlier. This is critical for the Council corporately to be able to act to spot performance risks and trends, to hold the director to account, and to support improvement. A strong corporate council can help to prevent failure as well as promote and support improvement. This has not happened historically in Tameside and needs to happen now. The recommendation of the recent Peer Challenge to establish an organisational improvement plan must lead to a greater focus on how the centre can be strengthened better to support and challenge service delivery.

Commissioners' reports in failing authorities almost always highlight the dual-aspect phenomenon of Council support services being perceived by the service (the 'customer') as bureaucratic, slow and inflexible, while support services experience the service as a 'difficult customer', demanding but unclear about exactly what it wants and needs. This is certainly present here, and I have seen evidence of leaders striving to work through this to create a better position, but there is more to do.

Some of the lack of pace seems to result from the operation of a 'Statutory Officers Group', comprising the Chief Executive, the S.151 Officer and the Assistant Director responsible for HR, Organisational Development, Performance and Transformation (not a 'statutory officer'). This group, frequently mentioned during this review, appears to exercise total control of all recruitment and appointment activity, even where a post is within establishment and budget. Papers must be prepared for the group, and it seems to exercise absolute decision-making. The members of the group are not the only 'statutory officers', and the risk is that the responsibility of statutory directors not part of this group (notably the DCS in this context) is fettered.

It remains unclear to me how decisions are taken corporately in Tameside. Papers go to Cabinet without being shared and signed off collectively by the corporate leadership team. The perception is that key decisions are taken by a subset of the leadership team: essentially the 'Statutory Officers' mentioned above. During the review, I observed an entire paper which set out the need and context for additional investment in Children's Services end up as four lines in a Cabinet Report of the Director of Resources/S.151 Officer, without the DCS even being aware that the decision was being taken. I was told that this route was for expediency in getting the resources agreed rapidly. However, the sense of control and decision-making authority being concentrated in a small group close to the Chief Executive is powerful. It serves to work against any collective accountability in the Council and undermines the statutory responsibility of other officers.

Leading politicians are committed to improving services for the borough's children and families. Nonetheless, there has been too much passivity in this leadership to date, and a consequent over-reliance on officers to 'get it right'. Here too, the narrative about being let down by individuals persists, rather than a reflection about what the Council should do to build better and more resilient services.

It was drawn to my attention during this review that there has never been a decision of the Executive 'called in' by Overview and Scrutiny. The reason provided was the depth of pre-decision scrutiny and discussion that takes place. However, given the protracted problems that the Council has had in Children's Social Care and other services, there is little evidence of strong outcome-focused decision-making and performance management to implement those decisions.

The challenge that good scrutiny brings to a Council is important. Tameside MBC should explore ways to achieve greater challenge and scrutiny, through its political processes and through the work of its Boards to contribute to driving better performance.

The new Corporate Plan, approved by the Council in March 2024, demonstrates the commitment the Council has to repairing its social care service for children and families. I share the view of the Peer Challenge that it now needs a clear organisational improvement plan setting out what the Council will do to drive improvement, monitor performance, and prioritise corporate support to its services.

Tameside MBC has had a long-running issue, and dispute with many of its schools and the Department for Education, concerning the academisation of schools built through PFI arrangements. The Council is resisting holding the liability for these at the point of transfer. Even where orders have been made for schools to convert, they have not been able to. While this issue is not within the purview of my role as Commissioner, I refer to it because it has a significant impact. The discontent within the schools community is great, permeating and polluting partnership work between the local authority and its schools. This includes risk to safeguarding partnership working, which thrives in an environment of mutual trust and confidence. It is now urgent that this matter gets resolved for Tameside, and what looks like historic intransigence needs to be brought quickly to an end.

I believe that the Council has not adequately understood, cared about, or engaged with its role and responsibilities towards its most vulnerable children. Children and families have been let down, and not exclusively by service leaders, but by the whole Council, political and corporate. If the Council is to retain control of its services, and these services are to achieve the standards families in the borough should expect, this has to change quickly.

It is not lost on me that many staff and service leaders across the Council have worked in Tameside for a long time, and that there is a keen sense of loyalty and commitment to the borough and its citizens. This is positive but needs to be matched now by a determined approach to sustained service improvement and culture change.

Partnerships

The partnership landscape in Tameside is not strong. Cracks and gaps in strategic partnerships are mirrored at an operational level. The Designated Safeguarding Partners have not exercised effective governance and oversight of the safeguarding system in Tameside in recent years. The DCS has worked hard to bring some focus to the partnership.

The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) has not been effective. Recent changes are, however, positive. The DCS, as one of the Designated Safeguarding Partners, has taken the Chair, and an independent scrutineer with appropriate skills and experience has been recruited. It is a positive change, albeit too soon to see its impact. There is renewed and improved engagement from Greater Manchester Police.

The Health landscape is challenging. The development of the new arrangements, including the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board and local Place arrangements, has been slow. Even key stakeholders remain unclear about the relationship between Place-based decision-making and the ICB. Consequently, the Place Board has experienced difficulty in influencing commissioning decisions about Child and Adolescent Mental Health services, the provider of which covers a number of Greater Manchester local authority areas and has unacceptably long waiting lists – longer in Tameside than the other areas. The reason for this difference is not understood but it clearly impacts on social care in Tameside.

There is commitment from Health to the partnership arrangements in Tameside. Commissioners and providers are now well represented at key partnership meetings and boards, although representatives attending the meeting of the Designated Safeguarding Partners have not always been able to take the necessary decisions on behalf of the ICB.

There was recognition that in the transition of governance in the NHS that some services had been denuded of resource and capacity and were still struggling to meet their responsibilities. This was highlighted in the local provider trust's Safeguarding Unit.

Tameside has acknowledged that, while neglect is a significant issue in the borough, staff across the partnership have not been equipped to deal with it well. On arrival, the DCS referred two cases to the National Safeguarding Panel. Both cases reflect multi-agency failure to work with long-term neglect effectively and consistently. The well-established Graded Care Profile 2 tool has not been used and is only now being rolled out. Designated Safeguarding Partners now recognise the importance of the issue and scale of workforce development needed across the partnership. This is urgent and important work.

Police, Health, and Education services seem to be co-located and working alongside each other, rather than operating as an integrated multi-agency service. It was of concern that most MASH partners with whom I spoke did not understand the

rationale for the changes implemented last summer/autumn when it was necessary to move away from the 'EHASH' model back to a more recognisable MASH. GM Police officers said they believed the EHASH model had been working well. Many were not aware of the risks highlighted in the independent review undertaken.

It is a fundamental requirement, in improving the effectiveness of the MASH, that it is done as a partnership endeavour. The Council must take partners with them in driving improvement. This has not always been evident. It is intended that the reformed MASH Strategic Board will embed a more collaborative, integrated approach; senior leaders, the Designated Safeguarding Partners, need to own and implement this way of working more than has been the case to date.

Some partners have described Tameside as difficult to work with. Organisations with reach across more than one local authority have compared unfavourably the pace at which things happen in Tameside, and the challenge of getting quick decisions from the Council. They have pointed to an apparent lack of delegation for decision-making as the issue. Good partnership working also deepens and improves because of the relationships between partners. The constant churn in leadership roles in the Council has served to undermine strong multi-agency partnership working.

Conclusions

In undertaking this review, I looked at previous Commissioners' reviews of authorities subject to Statutory Directions. There are a set of issues that appear in almost every review. These include:

- churn and lack of stable leadership;
- recruitment and retention of social workers;
- lack of political, corporate awareness of problems;
- loss of focus on the most vulnerable across the Council and the partnership;
- a lack of efficient, effective corporate service support to Children's Services combined with a lack of clarity about what Children's Services needs, creating the dynamic of poor customer service versus a difficult customer to serve.

All of these are present in Tameside and represent some of the key building blocks that need to be put in place for the Council to build a stronger, sustainable Children's Services.

Tameside MBC has provided poorly performing children's services for too long. Ofsted rated services Inadequate in 2016, Requires Improvement in 2019, found two Areas for Priority Action in 2022, and rated services (except for Care Leaver services) Inadequate once more in 2023.

During this period there has been regular churn in the senior leadership of Children's Services – at Director and Assistant Director level and at most tiers in the structure. There is no doubt that this has contributed to the poor retention in the social work workforce, to the uncertainty that permeates the organisation as to the Tameside Practice Framework, and to the weakness in partnership working.

Neither the Council nor the partnership system has been able to identify and respond to failure in Children's Services: the failure does not exist in isolation, but rather it should be seen as a symptom of weak corporate and partnership systems.

Current improvements are recent and fragile. They remain vulnerable while the management structure moves from being largely 'interim' to something more permanent and established. There appears to be a determination to grasp the key issues and to improve the Council's corporate 'grip' on service performance, and a sensible structure has been agreed for implementation.

I am asked to make a recommendation about whether the Council should retain control of its Children's Services or whether some form of alternative delivery model is necessary. Most of the characteristics of failing services that have moved into Children's Trusts elsewhere are evident in Tameside: a weak corporate and cultural context; unstable and inconsistent leadership over a protracted period; high churn in the workforce, linked to the leadership inconsistency; a weak partnership system.

I can see that some progress is being made, and that the current DCS is getting to grips with the service issues that need addressing. The Improvement Board has the right membership and is well-chaired, with an emerging rhythm of scrutiny, accountability, and challenge. There are plans being implemented to improve the impact of the Safeguarding Children Partnership, and signs of greater engagement from the Designated Safeguarding Partners.

The Chief Executive is relatively new to the role, albeit long-serving in the borough, as are the Council Leader and Lead Member. They all accept that their services have not been of an acceptable standard and have expressed both ambition and determination to provide better for the borough's vulnerable children and families. What remains untested is their willingness to take responsibility for enabling and driving that improvement, given the tendency to place blame on individuals for failures.

I have considered recommending a Children's Trust. At this point, however, I have not done so. Tameside cannot delegate its responsibility for improving outcomes for its most vulnerable children. Currently, it tends to shift accountability by adopting a blaming and 'othering' approach. The Council needs to take responsibility, collectively, act to support sustainable improvement, create the conditions that make this happen, and establish the oversight to know that it is happening.

In addition, Children's Trusts can be costly to implement and take time to establish. Tameside's most vulnerable children do not have this time.

This was a delicately balanced judgement; I am concerned about issues in the service, the culture and the corporate context that could, if unchecked, frustrate improvement. I do not rule out the possibility of the need for a Trust in future should things not improve.

I have also considered the potential for Tameside's Children's Services to be taken on by a neighbouring local authority. Some of the same risks apply in terms of time taken to establish and the scale of the task.

It is a significant act to remove responsibility from the Council for delivery of its Children's Services. On balance I have not recommended this: instead I am recommending a framework, or 'scaffold', upon which the Council has the opportunity to build sustained service improvement.

It is clear to me that Tameside Council must not be without support and oversight as it looks to establish lasting improvement. I am therefore recommending both the retention of a Commissioner and the commissioning of a Good local authority or Children's Trust to act as a Strategic Partner. This long-term relationship is designed to build consistency and resilience, as well as innovation and enterprise, into the DNA of Children's Services in Tameside. This should be a mutually agreed partnership, governed by a formal Memorandum of Understanding. The Partner will determine its priorities following a short, but detailed, diagnostic. These are likely to include the following improvement areas for the Council:

- reforming the Early Help offer;

- embedding change in the MASH and social care front door;
- driving improvement in assessment practice;
- driving drift and delay out of the Cared for Children service and helping arrive at a more appropriately sized care population;
- improving placement sufficiency and growing the fostering base, thereby building alternatives to residential care;
- building strength, rigour, and accuracy into Tameside's developing QA framework;
- supporting the development of strength and consistency of the leadership and management of practice;
- supporting 'Ofsted readiness' through the cycle of Monitoring Visits that lie ahead;
- supporting and modelling new and improved recruitment and retention activity;
- offering mentoring to practice leaders and managers;
- supporting cultural change across the service.

I am recommending that the Department retain the services of a commissioner until the next ILACS inspection takes place and demonstrates evidence of sustainable improvement.

Commissioner Recommendations

1. The Department for Education should retain a Commissioner to work with Tameside for the next 3 years, up to its next full inspection. The Commissioner's role will be:
 - to ensure the Council delivers its improvement plan;
 - to monitor, support and challenge the progress being made, working with the Council and the key partnerships;
 - to support and where necessary challenge the political and corporate Council as it develops its role in enabling better service delivery and a stronger improvement-oriented organisational culture;
 - to oversee and agree, on behalf of DfE, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Council and the Strategic Partner, dealing with the content and conduct of the new partnership;
 - to oversee the new partnership, ensuring that the Strategic Partner has the ability, capacity, and the authority to support the Council's progress and impact;
 - to agree, with the Council and the Strategic Partner, a Support Plan and key milestones and performance measures that demonstrate the right progress is being made at a pace that is both fast enough and sustainable;
 - to gain assurance that the Council is engaging well with the Strategic Partner to get maximum impact from the support;
 - to report regularly to the Minister on progress and risks, and
 - should progress prove insufficient, or risks too great, recommend alternative options for the delivery of Children's Services, including removal of control from the Council.

2. The Department for Education must commission a Strategic Partner to work with Tameside over a period of at least three years. This must be a strong local authority or Children's Trust experienced in supporting other organisations, to develop a detailed support plan, likely to include the following elements of support:
 - reforming the Early Help offer;
 - embedding change in the MASH and social care front door;
 - driving improvement in assessment practice;
 - driving drift and delay out of the Cared for Children service and helping arrive at a more appropriately sized care population;
 - improving placement sufficiency and growing the fostering base, thereby building alternatives to residential care;
 - building strength, rigour, and accuracy into Tameside's developing QA framework;
 - supporting the development of strength and consistency of the leadership and management of practice;
 - supporting Tameside in building its partnership relationships and structures with schools, police, health, and voluntary sector partners;
 - supporting 'Ofsted readiness' through the cycle of Monitoring Visits that lie ahead;

- supporting and modelling new and improved recruitment and retention activity;
 - offering mentoring to practice leaders and managers.
3. It is imperative for the LA to establish the 'Tameside Way'. It must embed a clear Practice Model and practice standards that will survive future changes in leadership so that staff develop a deep understanding and ownership of what good social work practice looks like in Tameside.

The LA needs to act to embed and create the conditions for good social work in Tameside, through the following work:

- roll-out and embed its practice model and restorative culture;
 - train staff and managers to enhance confidence in the ways of working and to adopt 'Brilliant at the Basics';
 - develop team managers and Heads of Service as strong leaders of practice;
 - create a clear expectation of CP Chairs and IROs to exercise their authority well in the way they lead challenge, scrutiny, and escalation.
4. The recently implemented Performance and Assurance Cycle needs to be embedded. Managers must be supported to accept audit and evaluation as a core element of the role so that Tameside builds a stronger, evidence-informed, and real-time understanding of its performance.
5. The increased visibility of service leaders and their engagement with frontline staff should be maintained to ensure that leaders know, and are connected to, the quality of practice; staff will feel engaged and that they have a voice in shaping Tameside's future.
6. The role of Principal Social Worker needs further development, so that they act as a real, vocal and visible champion for social work practice across Tameside. Through the Social Work Academy, they will establish a culture of learning and a workforce development plan that supports ASYEs and offers ongoing career development for social workers.
7. The Council must implement the proposed new structure and build stability into the leadership through permanent recruitment. As the structure acquires greater permanence then the Council's Children's Services leaders will build its capability and competence, in management and in practice leadership.
8. The Council must develop new, creative ways to attract social workers to Tameside. Agency social work rates remain far too high; the LA must promote itself as a local employer of choice, and to retain those who come. If the Greater Manchester shared recruitment is not delivering what the Council needs, then more is required. Corporate processes must be reviewed to rebalance the need for scrutiny and establishment control with the need to fill critical posts swiftly and efficiently.

Targets must then be set by the Council, agreed by the Commissioner, and supported by the Strategic Partner, for reductions in the reliance on agency social workers.

9. The Council must adopt best practice in the recruitment, selection, appointment, and retention of staff at all levels in Children's Services, starting with senior appointments. The market should routinely be tested through external recruitment, and accountable directors involved in recruitment of their leaders. For the period of Intervention, all decisions about appointments and terminations for positions in the top tiers of leadership (Director, Assistant Director, Head of Service) should involve consultation with the long-term Commissioner.
10. The Council must urgently improve its Corporate Parenting role. This includes:
 - Assuring a better understanding and discharge of role by elected members through bespoke and compulsory training. This can be supported by the LGA;
 - Ensure that the Corporate Parenting Board has representatives from across the political spectrum to ensure that this is everyone's responsibility and compliance with statutory corporate parenting responsibilities and local standards are adopted;
 - Broadening and deepening the Council's 'offer' to children in care, care leavers and care-experienced young adults. This will include apprenticeships, work opportunities, expectations of partners including contractors working on the borough's regeneration and the housing offer to care leavers;
 - Ensuring the Corporate Parenting Board properly engages and is led by the voices of young people with experience of care, and challenges the Council and partners to make an effective contribution and an appropriate offer to young people;
 - Involving partners, supporting and challenging them to improve their offer to care-experienced young people.
11. The long-running dispute between the LA and a number of its schools over PFI, academisation and FM issues must be resolved urgently. Tameside MBC has a legal duty to progress the conversion of directive academy orders issued to Denton Community College, Hyde High School, and Thomas Ashton School, all of which have existing PFI contracts. This duty is outlined under section 5B of the Academies Act 2010, as amended by the Education and Adoption Act 2016, stating that the local authority is under a legal duty to take all reasonable steps to facilitate the conversion of the school into an academy and thus benefit from the support of a strong multi academy trust. Tameside must now work urgently with the DfE to agree the PFI model agreements and to have these presented to their Executive Cabinet. The PFI model agreements offer existing protections and provisions and are commonly accepted by LAs nationally. Resolving this issue will impact significantly on the LA's relationship with schools across all fronts, critically including how they work together to safeguard children in the borough.
12. Corporate capacity to identify service and performance risk and weakness and drive improvement must be strengthened.

13. Scrutiny and political challenge must be strengthened. Children's Scrutiny must develop a robust forward plan and framework through which it can hold the Lead Member and officers to account for the delivery of services and outcomes for children. Members of the Children's Scrutiny Committee should have access to training, such as is provided by the LGA, to equip them to scrutinise and challenge well.
14. The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership must continue to reshape and reinforce its role in holding all partners to account for the quality of multi-agency safeguarding practice, led by the Designated Safeguarding Partners. A particular focus is required on the actions necessary following the Case Reviews considered by the National Safeguarding Panel and wider partnership responses to Neglect in Tameside. The Partnership also needs to satisfy itself that appropriate thresholds are being consistently applied to children in need and in need of a safeguarding response.
15. While social care remains as weak as it is, the LSCP should consider the role of its Independent Scrutineer, and specifically, the professional background of the post-holder. It is my view that a social work background is important for the Scrutineer, at this point in Tameside's improvement process. The scrutineer should report on progress in safeguarding partnership arrangements on a regular basis, to the Partners and to the Commissioner.
16. Recent progress in the Children's Improvement Board should be maintained so that the Board, independently chaired, continues to drive improvement. Continued independent chairing is important and supports scrutiny and challenge. During the period of my involvement as Commissioner, I have benefitted considerably from the involvement of the Children's Services Advisor, who chairs the Improvement Board. Given the scale of the task Tameside faces, my recommendation is that the services of the Advisor are retained to work alongside the Commissioner and the Council to drive and embed a culture of improvement and sustained quality.

Appendix 1: Commissioner Terms of Reference

Non-Executive Commissioner for Children's Services Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council Terms of Reference

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council have been found to be 'inadequate' across three out of the four key judgements in the Ofsted inspection report dated 13 February 2024. There is a presumption in cases of persistent or systemic failure that children's social care services will be removed from local authority control in order to bring about sustainable improvement, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

In line with the recommendations set out in the Ofsted report of children's social care, published 13 February 2024, the Children's Services Commissioner for Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council is expected to take the following steps:

1. To issue any necessary instructions to the Council for the purpose of securing immediate improvement in the Council's delivery of children's social care; to identify ongoing improvement requirements; and to recommend any additional support required to deliver those improvements.
2. To bring together evidence to assess the Council's capacity and capability to improve itself, in a reasonable timeframe, and recommend whether or not this evidence is sufficiently strong to suggest that long-term sustainable improvement to children's social care can be achieved should operational service control continue to remain with the Council.
3. To advise on relevant alternative delivery and governance arrangements for children's social care, outside of the operational control of the Council, taking account of local circumstances and the views of the Council and key partners.
4. To report to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State by July 2024.

Appendix 2: Tameside Inspection Outcomes 2016-23

Recommendations of Ofsted: Political, senior leadership governance and management oversight

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>4. Ensure that the quality assurance of work by senior and middle managers routinely considers the quality of managerial decision making and the application of thresholds at all stages of a child’s involvement with the local authority, including contacts within the public service hub.</p> <p>5. Improve the quality of performance management reporting to senior leaders and elected members, so that they have sufficient information to benchmark improvement against clear, good practice standards.</p> <p>6. Ensure that all staff receive high-quality supervision and managerial oversight at a frequency that reflects their skills and levels of experience and agree levels of external support for newly qualified staff on the assessed and supported year in employment programme.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The challenge provided by senior leaders, team managers, IROs and conference chairs about the pace and quality of social work and placements for children in care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Political and corporate leaders’ understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement and for this to be underpinned by a well-informed self-assessment and improvement plan that will drive and monitor practice improvement effectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The council’s oversight, accountability and governance of leadership of children’s services. ■ The regularity and effectiveness of management oversight and challenge.

Recommendations of Ofsted: Social Work Assessment and Practice

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>2. Ensure that action taken by social workers is compliant with statutory guidance and that the application of thresholds in casework with children and families is appropriate.</p> <p>3. Ensure that social work assessments include an effective consideration of history and parenting capacity that informs thorough analysis of risk and ensures that assessments are updated regularly to reflect children’s changing needs and circumstances.</p> <p>10. Ensure that when children go missing from home or care, the information gathered at return home interviews is used to inform planning effectively and reduce future risk.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Timely interventions to assess and reduce risk to children, including multi-agency strategy meetings and the allocation of a social worker to see children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The consistency in applying thresholds and interventions for children. ■ The quality of assessments to identify children’s needs and risks to support decision-making around next steps. ■ The quality of plans for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers to enable them to receive the support they need.

Recommendations of Ofsted: Work with partners / multi-agency working

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>8. Work with partners to ensure coordinated early help for a wider group of children through increased use of early help assessment and plans via the common assessment framework, and implement an effective quality assurance framework to monitor and improve the quality of work done in early help.</p> <p>9. Ensure that children looked after are provided with timely services to make certain that their emotional health and well-being are promoted.</p> <p>14. Review and update the corporate parenting strategy to give clarity to the work of the board and ensure that this is shared across the partnership, so that external scrutiny can support improvement in services for children looked after.</p>			<p>■ The multi-agency recognition and response to risk, including referrals, strategy meetings, when children go missing from home or care, arising risks for children in care and care leavers, and when allegations are made against professionals.</p>

Recommendations of Ofsted: Engagement, children’s voice: strategic and case-level

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>7. Ensure that children’s views and wishes are consistently gathered, recorded on files and used to inform planning.</p> <p>12. Ensure that support to the children in care council enables effective representation of the views of children of all ages and those placed at a distance from the local authority. This should include work to ensure that the pledge to children looked after and care leavers is refreshed and communicated effectively to all children and young people.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How consistently children’s wishes and feelings are used to inform assessments and plans. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The engagement and participation of children and young people in their assessments, planning and service delivery.

Recommendations of Ofsted: Theme: Local offer for care leavers and suitable accommodation

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>11. Ensure that all care leavers have an up-to-date and good-quality pathway plan that reflects their current needs and circumstances, and that they have full information about their entitlements to support them into adult life.</p> <p>13. Ensure that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for care leavers aged 18 to 25 ceases.</p>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The response to 16- and 17-year-old children who are homeless. ■ The work with care leavers to help them understand their rights and entitlements, their health histories and their understanding of the local offer

Recommendations of Ofsted: Theme: Pursuit of Permanence

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Timeliness of achieving permanence for children in care. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The timeliness of children achieving permanence.

Recommendations of Ofsted: Theme: Sufficiency, Staffing and Recruitment

2016 – Full Inspection	2019 – Full Inspection	2022 – Focused Visit	2023 – Full Inspection
Recommendations	What needs to improve?	Areas for Priority Action	What needs to improve?
<p>1. Ensure that all areas of service have sufficient staff of a suitable level of qualification and experience for the role that they are required to undertake and that their workloads are manageable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children’s experience of being able to develop a relationship with a consistent social worker who visits them regularly and makes sure their plans are progressed. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The recruitment and retention of staff and support for newly qualified social workers. ■ The timeliness and quality of the induction, training and review of foster carer agreements. ■ The sufficiency of placements to meet the needs of children.

Appendix 3: Roles and Responsibilities

Table showing roles and responsibilities for parties involved in the strategic partnership.

Commissioner	Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council (TMBC)	Strategic partner for TMBC (SP)	DfE
<p>Ensure TMBC implements its improvement plan.</p> <p>Monitor, support and challenge the progress being made, working with TMBC and the key partnerships.</p> <p>Support and challenge the political and corporate Council.</p> <p>Oversee and agree, on behalf of DfE, the Memorandum of Understanding between TMBC and the SP.</p> <p>Oversee the partnership, ensuring that the SP has the ability, capacity and the authority to support TMBC's progress and impact.</p> <p>Gain assurance that TMBC is engaging well with the SP.</p> <p>Report regularly to the Minister on progress and risks.</p> <p>If required, recommend alternative options for the delivery of Children's Services, including removal of control from the Council.</p>	<p>Agree to improvement support proposal from the Strategic Partner, overseen by the Commissioner.</p> <p>Recipient of improvement support offer from the Strategic Partner in line with the agreed proposal.</p> <p>Agree to external improvement support from providers identified and brokered by the Strategic Partner as agreed with the Commissioner.</p> <p>Retain statutory children's social care functions.</p> <p>Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to meet regularly with the Commissioner as agreed.</p> <p>SLT to meet regularly with DfE as agreed.</p> <p>Raise any concerns about the Strategic Partner with the Commissioner.</p> <p>Continue to adhere to the Statutory Direction issued to TMBC.</p>	<p>Provide improvement support to TMBC in line with agreement/conditions as set out in the DfE Contract/Grant Offer Letter.</p> <p>Curate, co-ordinate and have oversight of all external support into TMBC as agreed with the Commissioner.</p> <p>Escalate concerns in relation to delivery of improvement support to the Commissioner/DfE.</p> <p>Provide monthly progress reports to Commissioner and DfE.</p> <p>Support DfE with brokering Sector Led Improvement Support.</p> <p>Feed into Tameside improvement governance arrangements as appropriate e.g. LSCP board.</p>	<p>Grant/contract manager for the SP.</p> <p>Hold the SP to account for delivery and performance of grant agreement/contract of improvement support to TMBC.</p> <p>Broker Sector Led Improvement Programme (SLIP) support with the SP for TMBC as required.</p> <p>Support the SP to broker support with other non-SLIP local authorities.</p> <p>Work closely with the Commissioner to progress improvement support.</p> <p>Report back to Ministers on progress of the SP.</p> <p>Escalation point for Commissioner to raise concerns.</p>

Appendix 4: Existing escalation options, should sufficient progress not be made

Descriptions of different options for intervention.

Intervention	Description
LA partnerships	High performing LAs take over an inadequate LA's children's services and deliver them through a formal arrangement, overseen by the inadequate LA's political and corporate leadership.
Voluntary children's services trusts	The LA voluntarily sets up a trust to deliver children's social care (and potentially other services such as education) on their behalf. The Secretary of State appoints the chair of the Trust's board and the new organisation is funded and held to account by the inadequate LA.
Enforced children's services trusts	The LA is directed by the Secretary of State to set up a trust to deliver children's social care services. The Secretary of State appoints the chair of the Trust's board and the new organisation is funded and held to account by the inadequate LA.
Executive commissioners	MCHLG and DfE transfer the LA's statutory responsibility for children's social care to a team of executive commissioners, using powers set out in the Local Government Act 1999 or Education Act 1997. These powers can only be exercised where there is sufficient evidence of corporate failure to deliver best value or their basic statutory responsibilities to protect children from harm.

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