

Children's Services: Accountability, Leadership and the Failure to Learn

This Council notes that:

In 2015, Ofsted judged Trafford's children's services to be Good overall, with Leadership, Management and Governance rated Outstanding and the experiences and progress of care leavers also rated Outstanding. Ofsted described strong political and strategic leadership, proactive management, effective performance management and quality assurance, and a culture in which weaknesses were identified and acted upon.

In 2018, Ofsted continued to identify strengths in Trafford's services, but also recorded emerging weaknesses. Inspectors found that quality-assurance activity did not provide an up-to-date overview of practice, management oversight was not always evident, some social workers had excessive caseloads, and audit arrangements were not sufficiently routine to give leaders a comprehensive picture of current practice.

In March 2019, Trafford's children's services were judged Inadequate overall, with the impact of leaders on social-work practice also judged Inadequate. Ofsted concluded that there had been widespread deterioration in services as a result of failures in leadership. Inspectors found that senior leaders believed services remained good or outstanding, had no accurate understanding of the decline in practice, and would not have recognised significant weaknesses had the inspection not taken place.

The 2019 inspection also identified weaknesses in management oversight, quality assurance and Trafford's front-door response. Contacts and referrals were not always dealt with promptly, the service lacked sufficient capacity and oversight, and leaders did not have effective systems in place to identify the shortfalls that existed.

Following the 2019 judgement, Trafford entered an extended period of intervention and improvement activity.

In March 2021, Ofsted recognised progress and found that leaders had developed a more accurate understanding of service quality. However, inspectors continued to identify weaknesses in management oversight, planning, quality assurance and workforce stability, and reported that quality-assurance activity had not yet translated into consistently improved social-work practice.

In March 2022, Ofsted again recognised areas of improvement but warned that the pace and impact of planned improvements had been slow, with management and independent reviewing officer oversight still failing consistently to prevent drift and delay for some children.

In July 2022, inspectors again found too much variability in practice. Assessments remained inconsistent, management oversight did not always prevent drift, and senior leaders continued to address shortcomings in quality assurance and workforce stability.

At the full inspection in November and December 2022, Trafford improved from Inadequate to Requires Improvement to be Good. Ofsted specifically reported that senior leaders had developed a more accurate self-assessment and that the front door had been strengthened. However, inspectors again warned that the pace of improvement following 2019 had initially been too slow and that considerable variability remained across children's services.

In October 2023, a separate Ofsted and Care Quality Commission inspection of Trafford's SEND partnership found inconsistent experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND and required the partnership to make improvements. While this was a different inspection framework, it

identified wider concerns relevant to strategic oversight, accountability, transitions and the translation of strategy into practice.

In July 2024, Ofsted undertook a focused visit examining services for care-experienced young people. Inspectors recognised strengthened practice in some areas but again concluded that progress had been too slow, that service quality remained too variable, and that inconsistent management oversight meant some young people were not receiving the support required to make a successful transition into adulthood.

Despite this extensive history of inspection, intervention and improvement planning, the June 2026 inspection has again judged the impact of leaders on social-work practice to be Inadequate and the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection to be Inadequate.

Ofsted states that there has been a serious deterioration in services including the front-door response, leaving some children at risk of harm. Inspectors found delays in responding to contacts, delays in strategy discussions for children considered at risk of significant harm, and children being left in potentially unsafe circumstances for too long.

Most seriously, Ofsted concluded in 2026 that, while leaders had a general awareness of service and practice issues, the scale of those problems was not fully understood until the inspection; leaders did not have a wholly accurate self-assessment of the quality and impact of services; and they had not been effective in prioritising, challenging and making improvements in some critical areas.

Council notes the disturbing similarity between these conclusions and the 2019 Inadequate inspection, when Ofsted also concluded that leaders lacked an accurate understanding of deterioration and significant weaknesses would not have been recognised without the inspection.

Council further notes that Ofsted also identifies areas of good and improving practice in 2026, including improved services for children in care, increased workforce stability and a positive workforce culture.

This Council believes that:

The protection of vulnerable children is among the most fundamental responsibilities entrusted to a local authority.

The June 2026 judgement cannot reasonably be viewed in isolation. It must be considered against a decade-long inspection history in which weaknesses in management oversight, quality assurance, strategic grip, timeliness and the pace of improvement have repeatedly been identified.

The central concern is not simply that children's services have deteriorated. It is that they deteriorated while the systems intended to tell political and corporate leaders what was really happening failed to do so effectively, despite Trafford having received substantially the same warning following the 2019 inspection.

Effective leadership requires more than confidence in improvement plans, performance frameworks and assurances provided to senior decision-makers. It requires those assurances to be tested rigorously against the actual experiences of children and families.

A recurring feature of Trafford's two Inadequate leadership judgements is a significant gap between leaders' understanding of their services and the reality subsequently identified by Ofsted. In 2019, inspectors found that senior leaders believed services remained good or outstanding despite significant deterioration.

In 2026, Ofsted again found that leaders did not fully understand the scale of serious problems until inspectors arrived and did not possess a wholly accurate self-assessment of service quality and impact. This was evidenced by Cllr Carter's (Executive Member for Children's Services at the time) response to Cllr Duncan's question in council 29th January 2025 and later evidenced by the Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Cllr S Proctor after receiving the 2026 report exclaimed that they were 'shocked by this report'. Clear evidence that the leadership did not have a grasp of the seriousness of the situation.

This repetition represents a profound failure of organisational challenge and assurance. Seven years after Trafford was confronted with the consequences of leaders having an inaccurate picture of children's services, residents were entitled to expect systems of political and corporate oversight that questioned reassuring performance information, challenged senior officers robustly and ensured that the reality experienced by vulnerable children matched the picture presented to decision-makers.

The 2026 findings therefore raise a wider question of public confidence. If an authority responsible for safeguarding vulnerable children can fail to appreciate the seriousness of deterioration in this critical service until external inspectors expose it, residents are entitled to ask whether the Council's assurance arrangements are sufficiently robust to identify deterioration elsewhere before services reach crisis point.

The fact that Trafford's front door was specifically reported as strengthened in 2022, only for Ofsted to identify serious deterioration in that same area by 2026, raises profound questions about whether improvements were sufficiently embedded, monitored and sustained.

Council recognises that many dedicated social workers, after-care workers and other frontline professionals continue to provide compassionate and effective services to Trafford children. The 2026 report itself recognises increased workforce stability, positive workforce culture and good practice in services for children in care. Accountability for systemic failure should therefore not be displaced onto frontline employees.

Political leadership carries responsibility for governance, challenge, scrutiny and ensuring that senior management has the capacity, systems and accountability necessary to protect children.

Trust cannot be restored simply by another improvement plan or another assurance that lessons have been learned. It requires political accountability, independent challenge and demonstrable evidence that the culture of accepting reassurance has been replaced by one of rigorous scrutiny, openness and challenge.

This Council therefore resolves to:

1. Record its profound concern at the June 2026 Ofsted findings and apologise to those children and families who have experienced unacceptable delay, insufficient protection or inadequate services.
2. Place on record its thanks to Trafford's social workers, family-support staff, after-care workers, foster carers and other frontline professionals who continue to support vulnerable children and families, and recognise the areas of good practice identified by inspectors.
3. Declare that the recurrence of an Inadequate leadership judgement, following the previous Inadequate judgement in 2019 and repeated intervening warnings concerning management oversight, quality assurance and the pace of improvement, represents a serious failure of governance and accountability.
4. Declare that this Council has lost confidence in the administration's political leadership and its ability to provide the rigorous challenge, oversight and assurance required to ensure that serious

deterioration in Council services is identified and addressed before external intervention is required.

5. Call upon the Leader of Trafford Council to accept political responsibility for the administration's failure to ensure that the lessons of the 2019 Inadequate judgement were permanently embedded, and for the subsequent failure of political and corporate assurance which allowed serious deterioration to occur without its scale being properly understood, and to resign as Leader of the Council.
 6. Call upon the Executive collectively to accept responsibility for the failures in governance, challenge and assurance evidenced through this chronology and to set out publicly how confidence in the political oversight of children's services will be restored.
 7. Request the immediate establishment of a strengthened, independently chaired Children's Services Improvement and Assurance Board, with appropriate external safeguarding and social-care expertise, to oversee improvement activity and report regularly and publicly on progress.
 8. Require the administration to publish a comprehensive improvement plan setting out each Ofsted finding and area for improvement; a named accountable senior officer for every action; measurable performance indicators and deadlines; arrangements for independent validation of progress; and evidence of the impact of improvement activity on individual children rather than simply completion of processes.
 9. Require regular reports to the appropriate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with performance information sufficient to allow members to test whether improvements are genuinely changing children's experiences.
 10. Request a specific independent review of why the deterioration in the front-door service was not identified and remedied sooner, including examination of what information was available to senior officers and elected members, what warnings were escalated, what assurance was provided and whether scrutiny arrangements were sufficiently robust.
 11. Request that the review specifically compare the circumstances preceding the 2019 and 2026 Inadequate leadership judgements, identifying why similar failures in organisational self-awareness and management grip were allowed to recur and what structural changes are required to prevent a third repetition.
 12. Require the findings of that review, subject only to lawful safeguarding, employment and confidentiality restrictions, to be reported publicly to Full Council.
 13. Affirm that the objective of these measures must be more than achieving a better Ofsted grade: it must be to create a children's service in which Trafford can demonstrate continuously - not merely at inspection - that vulnerable children receive timely, safe and consistently good help and protection. Inspection evidence underpinning the motion
- Ofsted, Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council (2015).
 - Ofsted, Focused visit to Trafford Metropolitan Borough children's services (July 2018).
 - Ofsted, Inspection of children's social care services, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council (March 2019).
 - Ofsted, Focused visit to Trafford children's services (March 2021).
 - Ofsted, Monitoring visits to Trafford children's services (March and July 2022).
 - Ofsted, Inspection of Trafford local authority children's services (November-December 2022).
 - Ofsted/CQC, Area SEND inspection of Trafford Local Area Partnership (October 2023) - separate inspection framework.
 - Ofsted, Focused visit to Trafford children's services: care leavers (July 2024).
 - Ofsted, Inspection of Trafford local authority children's services (June 2026).