

Sunderland City Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 28 June 2021 to 9 July 2021

**Lead inspector: Neil Penswick
Her Majesty’s Inspector**

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children’s services in Sunderland are outstanding. The city council has a highly robust oversight of its statutory children’s services which are delegated to Together for Children (TfC) to be delivered on the council’s behalf. Inspectors found these services to be of a very high quality and making a real difference to children’s lives. Senior leaders and members of the council have demonstrated an unstinting commitment to improving children’s outcomes with sustained and significant investment in children’s services. Children and families benefit from highly successful early help initiatives and significantly improved and enhanced help and protection services. A small number of assessment plans and managerial supervisions could be further improved to be consistently of a high standard in all of the teams. The quality of services for cared for children and for care experienced children is consistently of a high quality.

This highly impressive improvement has incrementally been achieved from the previous Ofsted inspection in 2015 when all aspects of children’s services were judged to be inadequate. At the Ofsted 2018 inspection, solid improvements were

judged to have been made for children in care, children with a plan for adoption and care leavers. However, there had not been sufficient progress made for children who needed help and protection. Since then, Ofsted visits have continued to find improvements in Sunderland children's services, including further building on the progress evident in key areas at the focused visit in March 2021. This strong focus on continued improvement is even more impressive given that it was during a global pandemic, which is still having a profound impact on the communities in Sunderland, and on the workforce of the council and of TfC.

Apart from a short period at the beginning of the first lockdown, senior managers provided their full range of services whilst continuing to work ceaselessly on making further improvements. Highly skilled, permanent workers and managers have been recruited. Staff receive high-quality training and support. A nationally recognised model of social work has been implemented and is embedding. Senior managers are delivering significant cultural change focused on putting children and their voices central to all their work. Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of practice through strong management oversight and through a vastly improved integrated children's database of information, quality assurance and performance management systems. At every level of the organisation, relationship-based social work is at the centre of the strategic and operational improvements to children's services.

Inspectors met children and young people from several different groups who were supporting the improvement journey. All reported powerfully how they felt central to the changes made in Sunderland children's services.

What needs to improve

- The consistency of the quality of assessments, plans and managerial oversight.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good

1. Services for children who need help and protection have continued to improve and are now solidly good. The response by Sunderland Children's services to concerns is robust and ensures that risk is identified in a timely way and responded to well. The use of the chosen model of practice has transformed social workers' approach to working with families, and their support networks, to better support children. As a result, most children get the right level of help and protection when they need it and their outcomes have significantly improved.
2. Early help provision is comprehensive and well embedded. It is making a real difference to children's and families' lives. Since the last judgement inspection, early help has developed into an innovative multi-agency service able to meet an increasingly complex level of need to prevent the escalation

of cases to statutory services. Children benefit from a well-coordinated array of services that provide help when needs first arise. The vast majority of children and families get the appropriate level of help and support at the right time delivered by skilled professionals, which makes a difference to their day-to-day lives. Children who met inspectors also reported very positively that early help participation groups had helped them develop new friendships, confidence and strategies for managing their feelings.

3. Thresholds between early help and social care are well understood by all the agencies and are appropriately applied. As a result, children are receiving the right level of intervention and in a timely way. The Integrated Contact and Referral Team provides a proportionate response to contacts and referrals through consideration of the history, the current situation and an appropriate level of checks with partners, to inform decision-making. The quality of this work is now consistently good, which is an evident improvement from the last Ofsted visit.
4. The analysis of risk is detailed and recommendations are clear, which enable families to be directed to the right service. When issues are identified that need either further evaluation or support from children's social care, timely social work actions through child in need or child protection assessments are undertaken. Out-of-hours emergency social work services are responsive to risk for children living with families, cared for and care experienced children. Communication with day services and other agencies is comprehensive.
5. Child protection enquiries are thorough with a clear rationale for next steps leading to appropriate responses to child protection concerns. Strategy discussions are well attended by relevant professionals who share detailed information that enables a well-informed discussion of current risk. The outcomes to be achieved are clear, and robust action plans ensure that children are not left in situations of unaddressed risk. When there are concerns about risk from professionals who work with children, there is a robust process and oversight by the designated officer, which ensures that children are well protected.
6. The majority of assessments are comprehensive and analytical. This is a significant improvement from the previous inspections and visits. The use of the chosen model of social work provides a good framework for multi-agency consideration of risk and need. Plans are thorough, updated frequently and reflect the child's experiences. New information results in re-evaluations of findings, with a range of support services provided promptly, helping parents to achieve and sustain the requisite changes. However, inspectors did see a small number of assessments which were more superficial and did not sufficiently consider the direct experiences of the children.
7. Exemplary work by the pre-birth team is highly effective in helping and protecting vulnerable children either to remain safely in the care of their

parents or to achieve permanence with extended family or by adoption. Pre-birth assessments are comprehensive and thoughtfully reflect on parental risks and, through their interventions, identify a clear family network to establish safety for the baby.

8. An area of strength is workers' persistence in developing relationships, which becomes the means for positive change for children and families. Strenuous efforts have been made throughout the pandemic to visit children face to face. Social workers know children and their families well. TfC staff are increasingly using tools from the chosen model of practice to work with parents and children. These are having a powerful impact on helping parents to understand what life is like for their children living with issues such as parental mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Other focused, purposeful direct work is done at the child's pace, helping children to understand what is happening.
9. When risks increase, there is timely escalation to child protection planning. Social workers' reports to initial and review conferences clearly detail strengths, areas of concern, progress made and ongoing support needs. The analysis is concise and provides the information for professionals to make an informed decision. As a result, children are not subject to 'higher level' processes longer than is required.
10. Strong and effective partnership working helps to better protect children from harm. Multi-agency core groups are held regularly and are used well to measure progress and update the child protection plans. Staff spoke to inspectors positively about how the approach to risk management embedded in the social work model is helping parents, children and family network members understand the concerns. The vast majority of child in need and child protection plans are of a high quality, providing clarity about what needs to happen linked to the child's timeframe for change.
11. Managerial oversight has demonstrably improved with clear manager oversight at all levels, including by child protection chairs, throughout a child's written records. In a very small number of cases, the quality and effectiveness of supervision is still inconsistent and not progressing plans effectively.
12. When risks continue to escalate, pre-proceedings are swiftly issued. Substantial work is undertaken to support some of the most vulnerable families to prevent the need for care proceedings. This is having a positive effect of enhancing parenting ability, reducing levels of risk and improving the welfare and outcomes for children. Decisions to remove children from parental care are proportionate and based on an assessment of the harm they are experiencing or likely to experience. Managers have continued to improve the quality of letters before proceedings. The more recent letters are more explicit on the expectations of parents. Although having improved since the

last Ofsted visit, a small number of children had recently come into care in a crisis where inspectors identified that earlier and more robust intervention may have prevented this occurring. This was mainly due to the previous poor practice in Sunderland.

13. There is a robust response for children and young people when they are at risk of exploitation. The oversight provided by the missing, slavery, exploited and trafficked operational group provides added value in the level of scrutiny and challenge it brings to practice. As a result, the group is able to facilitate a joined-up approach from a wide range of agencies such as different police teams, social care, and housing. These meetings also ensure that disruption activities are targeted to the right community or person based on shared intelligence. There is good follow-up when children go missing from home or care. There is robust tracking of those children who are missing education with effective work with other partners, including the benefits agency and child missing education leads in other local authorities. There are similarly robust procedures for children who are electively home educated, effectively evaluating and responding to risk.
14. Young people aged 16 to 17 who are homeless are well supported by the Next Steps team. Young people are appropriately assessed and, when needed, offered support through being in care. A housing worker in the team supports the social workers and has access to a good range of accommodation for these vulnerable young people.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Outstanding

15. Tenacious staff work tirelessly to ensure that children are at the centre of all work and interventions. Staff are strong advocates for their children. As a result, children's needs are being addressed proactively to a high standard. Children are very well supported to deal with early trauma. Significant improvements in permanence planning mean that the vast majority of children remain in stable homes that meet their needs for security, emotional warmth and care. Determined professionals ensure that they remain in touch with care experienced young people. The whole service is highly aspirational for children's futures, resulting in many achieving positive outcomes.
16. High-quality and timely decisions are made to ensure that children become cared for at a time that is right for them. Permanence planning starts immediately when children enter care, whether that is a return to parents, to live within their family network or permanence away from the family. Social work evidence to court and reports to legal gateway panels are detailed, and clearly evidence concerns and rationale for decisions. This facilitates informed decision-making that promotes children's well-being and swiftly meets their needs. Senior managers maintain a strong oversight of children's progress within legal proceedings to ensure robust and timely decision-making. Positive

feedback from the judiciary and the children and family court advisory and support service supported the view that the service improvements were benefiting children and families at this critical and important time.

17. Hearing the voice of the child is an exceptional strength in Sunderland. Cared for, and care experienced, children have a voice and they are encouraged to use it. Children's voices resound within records and clearly inform future planning. A strong Change Council is promoting the needs and shaping the services for future cared for children in Sunderland. Children are seen alone and imaginative direct work and engagement with children ensures that the voice of the child is consistently evident. Cared for children are seen regularly and in line with their needs.
18. Children's health needs are very well understood and promoted by workers who know them well. There is an excellent range of services which supports children with their mental health and emotional well-being needs. The Children and Young People's Service is a proactive service available to cared for children and care experienced young people who have emotional needs and/or poor mental health. This is ensuring that they have swift access to services and no delay in their needs being addressed. Children are also appropriately referred to child and mental health services or the in-house psychologist and the specialist therapy worker who support foster families. Delays in dental checks due to the lockdowns had been evident at the last Ofsted visit, but work has been ongoing to effectively address these issues.
19. The virtual head and virtual school are extremely tenacious and ambitious advocates of cared for children, reflected in academic targets and the support to children's well-being. Leaders from the virtual school provide clear guidance and expectations to all of those working with the children. Personal education plans are ambitious. Cared for children's attendance at school has improved and there is evidence of good and improving outcomes for many young people.
20. In the past year, impressive improvement in permanence planning means that many more children live with loving carers who are meeting their needs well. For instance, in March 2020, 28 children were matched to permanent carers, while this month the figure is 141. Inspectors were very impressed at how permanence through fostering is celebrated, including children being awarded a permanence certificate reassuring them of the stability of their home.
21. There is highly effective recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers with a steady flow of prospective carers joining the fostering service. There are clear and early processes for family finding and matching to support informed decisions and identification of the right foster families for children. For some children, this has resulted in a short-term foster home becoming the child's permanent home as they have settled so quickly. The fostering service promotes a very robust therapeutic parenting approach that is underpinned

by a strong research base. Although a lack of suitable placements has resulted in moves for a very small number of children to better match them, short-term placement stability has improved over the last 12 months.

22. The importance of birth family relationships is not underestimated. Family time is promoted very well and reviewed to ensure that children can safely continue to see their birth parents where appropriate. There is robust monitoring and reviewing of cared for children who live at home with parents. Highly effective support plans are developed, usually through the child's family safety network. Excellent life story work and later life letters are completed by committed social workers who have enduring relationships with children, helping them understand their experiences.
23. Adoption is considered in a timely way, and children are matched and placed with adoptive parents at the earliest opportunity. The preparation, assessment and approval of applicants is strong. Good-quality information-sharing, training and a high level of support from adoption workers are instrumental in achieving positive adoptive homes for children. Foster to adopt is promoted. Staff are ceaseless and proactive when looking for prospective adopters for children, including children with complex needs. Special Guardianship assessments are detailed and completed well in collaboration between the fieldwork teams and the connected carers teams. Additional support needs are identified in the placements and suitable arrangements are made to reduce the risk of any placement breakdown.
24. Cared for children's reviews are regular and comprehensive and there is good evidence of tracking and monitoring of children's progress by the Independent Reviewing Officers. Inspectors saw examples of parents being enabled to contribute to planning decisions, even when the care plan is for children to be cared for away from the family home.
25. Social workers and personal advisors (PAs) spoke knowledgeably and with affection for the care experienced young people that they are supporting. Workers are tenacious at maintaining contact with them and are aspirational for them to achieve and do well. They show great warmth and pride in even the small achievements and progress that care experienced young people make.
26. As young people approach 18, their needs and vulnerabilities are clearly identified assisting in pathway planning. Inspectors saw a mixture of approaches to pathway plans, with most reflecting the voice of the child to an exceptional degree. The plans are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changing need. There is a good range of accommodation options available to young people as they approach 18 and beyond. The proportion of young people remaining in education, employment and training is improving, although it remains an ongoing challenge to maintain this in respect of those who are over 17 years old. There are now 27 care experienced young people

at university, which is a high proportion of these young people and once again reflects the ambition of TfC and the council.

27. Young people over the age of 18 are exceptionally well supported by children's services. PAs are tenacious at maintaining contact with young people and are aspirational for them to achieve and do well. The consistently high-quality work provides a range of support, including for young people with occasional needs for additional help to those with complex histories which, as a result, at times lead to concerning behaviours. Inspectors saw much sensitive relationship-based work and also examples of where the PAs have challenged the young people as would be expected from a 'good parent'. There are specialist PAs who support the young people in higher education, and an activities officer who stayed in touch with the young people during the pandemic providing activity packs, developing cooking sessions and organising drop-ins to combat the isolation experienced as a result of the pandemic.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Outstanding

28. Leaders and managers are confident, ambitious and influential in changing the lives of local children, young people and their families including cared for children and care experienced young people. During the pandemic, Sunderland managers ensured the provision of high-quality social work support to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children. Despite the challenges of providing services at this time, they did not stand still but continued to work ceaselessly to further improve their services to better respond to children and family need.
29. In 2015, Children's services in Sunderland were judged by Ofsted to be inadequate across all the judgement areas. An Ofsted re-inspection in 2018 found that, while improvements had been made for children in care services and adoption services were judged to be good, help and protection services were still failing to sufficiently protect children. Leaders and managers had not understood or addressed the extent of the poor practice. An alternative delivery model for children's social care, namely TfC, was created to deliver children's services functions on behalf of the council. Due to the complexities involved in establishing the company, it did not start to deliver services until April 2017.
30. The current Chief Executive of TfC, who is also the statutory Director of Children's Services, commenced in their role after the last Ofsted inspection. Since the 2018 inspection, there have been four Ofsted visits to monitor progress, together with a focused visit, to provide assurance on the quality of services being provided during the pandemic. All of the Ofsted visits have provided evidence of substantial and sustained improvements in practice and in the outcomes achieved by children. An example of the excellent senior

management drive for improvement was the TfC rapid focus on addressing the issues, impacting on a small number of children, reported on at the focused visit in March 2021. As a result of this focus, inspectors could see, on this inspection, that children were benefiting from further improvements in services and, thus, achieving better outcomes.

31. The strong focused work by the highly committed Chief Executive of TfC, the Director of Social Care and the senior management team has resulted in exceptional improvements being made, over the past six years, to the quality of social work support to children and families in Sunderland. This has ensured that the vast majority of children and their families receive high-quality support.
32. On this inspection, inspectors evaluated social work practice to be of consistently high quality and relentless in significantly improving the experience of children and young people. Amongst the range of exceptional work seen by inspectors across the entirety of children's services is the highly innovative multi-agency partnership work, delivering early help services. There is excellent support to vulnerable young parents provided by the pre-birth team, and exemplary work being undertaken to recognise the importance of, and the celebration of, permanence arrangements for cared for children.
33. This highly impactful work has been facilitated by the robust support and the commitment of the Chief Executive of Sunderland City Council, the council members and staff across the council. An improvement board chaired by a highly experienced independent senior manager has also constructively and successfully challenged partner agencies to contribute to the improvements in services.
34. From the start of the Chief Executive of TfC's appointment, she has rightly insisted that there needed to be a transformation in the culture of the organisation, focusing on the quality of practice and ensuring consistently good outcomes for children and young people. As a result of her focus on continuous improvement, a new and vibrant culture is now widespread across children's services in Sunderland. This successful approach has resulted in children's voices and influence being central to assessments, planning and interventions. Staff across the council and the multi-agency partnerships are hugely focused on seeking to identify vulnerabilities and needs, providing support for children and families before problems escalate.
35. Senior managers have focused on the right things. They have been decisive in recruiting a permanent and excellent set of social workers to replace the short-term and agency staff that were previously in post. Highly skilled managers have also been recruited and then supported with well-focused training and mentoring opportunities. In addition to recruiting experienced and good practitioners, TfC has continued to support the training of caring

and skilled staff to become social workers. Ongoing post-qualification support and training has also ensured further skills and career development, which have not only benefited the service but families who are now receiving support from committed and well-informed practitioners.

36. TfC introduced a highly regarded model of social work practice and has rolled this out across all its services. This is supported by dedicated and experienced practitioners and an extensive training programme for all TfC staff and multi-agency colleagues. While senior managers acknowledge that this is a five-year programme and more needs to be done to fully embed the model, inspectors saw many examples of where the implementation of this common approach was transforming children's lives for the better.
37. Senior leaders have extensive knowledge of service and practice strengths and where improvements are needed. Quality assurance activity and auditing has significantly improved. It is now rigorous with a clear shift to focus on the impact of practice on children's lives and experiences, acknowledging where good work has resulted in successful outcomes alongside identifying what can be further improved. As a result of the quality assurance work, not only has individual social work improved but there has been clear and positive impact improving the quality of supervision, assessments, direct work and ensuring that the voices of children are heard. Consultation with families and children in auditing is a key element of this work. The feedback from those families involved further validates that their experiences are at the centre of the social work in Sunderland.
38. Performance management information is of an exceptionally high quality. Senior leaders routinely and effectively scrutinise performance information. The excellent accessible live data and summary documents also enable managers at all levels to fully comprehend the key information, to react where necessary and to make swift improvements to services.
39. Listening to children is central to all the service improvements. Inspectors met children and young people from a number of groups who were contributing to the improvement in services. They all reported on how services were much better, how they were personally benefiting from their views being heard and how their contributions were improving the lives of other children. For instance, the Sunderland Youth Council is a highly impressive and committed group of young people who dedicate their time, energy and ideas to make Sunderland a better place for children and young people to live. They have instigated meaningful campaigns around mental health, developing mental health charter mark status for schools, providing kit bags for the homeless and in improving the environment through targeted litter campaigns in the city.
40. Similarly, the Change Council is a dedicated and influential group of young people who are having an extraordinarily positive impact on the delivery of

services for children in Sunderland. They described how their intervention had brought about changes for children including the change the language campaign, training elected members, changing the referral criteria for care experienced children who become parents, and regular meetings with housing providers. They quite rightly have a great sense of pride in the recognition they receive for their achievements, which are facilitated by an organisation that is willing to learn from their views.

41. Senior leaders and elected members are aspirational corporate parents. There is a relentless focus on improving the lives and experiences of cared for children and care experienced young people. This has resulted in additional training for council members. In addition, the increased participation of children in this training and service planning has ensured a much more robust and challenging approach to ensuring good-quality services across the council. All the council's departments consider the impact of their work on children. As a result, there is a palpable sense across the council that cared for children and care experienced young people are 'our children'.
42. All of the social workers, who met inspectors, were highly complementary about working for TfC in Sunderland and describe feeling well supported by visible and approachable managers. All workers have reasonable caseloads and, as a result, across all of the TfC services, they are supported to carry out innovative and direct work with children. They receive regular supervision which, for the vast majority of time, is reflective and appropriately challenging to further improve their practice. Social workers know their children well and speak passionately and with care about them. Inspectors could see that the relationship-based social work, spoken about by all the staff and managers they met, has been integral to the improvements in the services for the most vulnerable children and their families in Sunderland. As a result, many children's lives are improving in the city.



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2021