

Inspection of Portsmouth City Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 May 2023

Lead inspector: Christine Kennet, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Most children in Portsmouth receive a good service, and for some, it is outstanding. Services for care-experienced young people are less well developed. Leaders and managers are committed to the ongoing improvement of services for children and families. They have worked with partner agencies to deliver transformation, particularly within the early help and family safeguarding teams, which stand out as areas of strong practice, delivering excellent experiences and progress for children.

Leaders have created an environment that supports the chosen model of practice and prioritises children's wide-ranging needs. Leaders work effectively with partners to respond to children's well-being needs. As a result, leaders have been able to expand opportunities through joint commissioning to provide integrated care services. This is making a difference to children's lives and reducing their need for statutory services.

Children benefit from an improved early help offer, delivered by skilled and experienced practitioners. The family safeguarding and support teams now provide an integrated, whole-family approach; adult care social workers work alongside children's social workers to support the whole family to reduce risks and promote change. Services are family-focused, but a child-centred approach has been

maintained. Disabled children and children with complex needs receive an improved service from specialist workers who are based within the family safeguarding and support service.

When children need to come into care, most benefit from effective foster carers and stable homes. A new model of foster care has been introduced, with foster carers working in groups. This model helps to support children's complex needs and has resulted in improvements to the stability of long-term placements. Children's care plans have improved, helping workers to identify and address needs quickly. A specialist team provides unaccompanied asylum-seeking children with a consistent approach, supporting them to settle and to feel welcome on arrival.

Although no services have deteriorated, services for care-experienced young people have improved too slowly. Leaders are aware of this and have begun to address this area of practice. In addition, improvements are needed to ensure proportionality when dispensing with parental consent and in the recording of daily logs by foster carers regarding children in their care.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of services for care-experienced young people, in particular, access to health histories, education, employment and training and broader housing options.
- The recording of the rationale for decision-making when dispensing with parental consent.
- Foster carers capturing children's experiences and critical incidents so that the records are available for reference and for the children in later life.

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

1. Impressive early help services are a strength and have improved since the last inspection in 2018. Well-designed and resourced integrated support services are commissioned to deliver an excellent range of services and interventions through five family hubs across the city. Children, including those with complex needs, receive highly skilled and specialist help from an extensive early help matrix of services. Assessments are comprehensive, informative and timely and draw on a range of views provided by relevant professionals. Plans are well devised and regularly reviewed. Interventions are trauma-informed, restorative, multidisciplinary and systemic. Children's circumstances are improved, and parents and carers empowered and enabled to parent with more confidence. Families co-produce family plans with interventions designed to meet their needs and those of their children. A team around the worker model supports one professional to be involved in children's lives, while maintaining contact with other relevant professionals. Targeted support in early help is reducing the need for interventions at a higher level. Although the family plan is still embedding, there is already a reduction in referrals, including repeat referrals, and children are able

to receive the right level of support in the right part of the service to meet their needs.

2. Thresholds are clearly understood, and most children and families receive timely and effective support. Children requiring a statutory service are promptly referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Decision-making in the MASH is proportionate and consistent with the presenting level of need and risk. Management oversight is timely and risk-assessed, and a lead professional is identified promptly. Responses are made to referrers once an outcome has been determined, ensuring that they understand what will happen next. This is an improvement since the last inspection.
3. Consistently strong partnership working in the MASH, including the police, health and early help services, is established and works well. Police and youth offending services support MASH decision-making and consider the risk of offending and how to support and divert children who may be vulnerable to exploitation. Partners are present at multi-agency risk assessment meetings for domestic abuse/violence and missing, exploited and trafficked strategy meetings as well as daily police management meetings to share wider information. For a small number of children, when decisions are made to dispense with parental consent, this is not always proportionate to the presenting risks and the rationale is not clearly recorded. Children do not experience delay when transferring from the MASH to the family safeguarding service, which enables them to receive a timely, effective and proportionate response.
4. The out-of-hours service, provided in collaboration with a neighbouring authority, responds promptly to urgent issues, visits families when required and is child-focused. The service ensures that urgent safeguarding matters are dealt with and that risks to children are well managed. There is effective handover between the out-of-hours service and the MASH, where work is picked up quickly and progressed. Strategy meetings held out of hours are well recorded and information is provided swiftly to daytime staff.
5. Skilled, joined-up work, delivered through the local authority's preferred model of practice and involving workers for adults and children, is improving the experiences and progress of children. Consistently strong assessments are timely, comprehensive and child-focused. Children are visited quickly and are seen alone. Creative and purposeful direct work is undertaken, which helps children to build trusted relationships and to share their feelings openly to inform assessment outcomes and decisions about next steps. Assessments demonstrate professional curiosity and a thorough analysis of risks and strengths, as well as an understanding of the impact of parental issues on children's progress. Risk of harm is identified by workers and effective action is taken to protect children when risks increase. Workers understand the cumulative impact of long-term neglect and trauma on children's progress and link children with services that can provide emotional support. Families receive well-coordinated support and advice to address often entrenched issues of domestic abuse, alcohol abuse and mental

health problems. Parents are helped effectively to tackle the challenges that they face. In many cases, the support and intervention that families receive result in sustained improvement and enable children to remain in the care of their parents, if it is safe to do so.

6. Timely strategy meetings are held in response to escalating or emerging risks and are well attended by partner agencies. Child protection and child-in-need plans are clear and focus on critical issues affecting children's lives. Plans are well written, multi-agency and are routinely reviewed. Parents and professionals attend reviews and core groups and are actively involved in creating plans for their children. Practitioners and managers take the necessary action if children's circumstances do not improve as a result of the support they are receiving. Child protection enquiries are thorough and analytical and lead to timely actions to reduce risks to children. Initial and review child protection conferences are well attended, and timely and clear records provide evidence of the decisions that are made.
7. Disabled children benefit from comprehensive and detailed assessments undertaken by specialist practitioners within the family safeguarding service. If children are unable to communicate verbally, social workers take additional time to get to know them, to understand their relationships, wishes and feelings. Disabled children's needs are robustly assessed and understood, to inform early transition plans.
8. When children's experiences are not improving, there is appropriate escalation to legal gateway meetings. Once in pre-proceedings, help, support and planning are effective. This results in most children's lives improving, and they are able to remain living safely with their families. Some pre-proceedings letters are not individualised to the parent concerned and language is not always sensitively considered. Leaders are aware of this and are making changes accordingly.
9. Risks in relation to children going missing and being exploited are identified well and, for most children, risks are reducing. Specialist workers undertake bespoke direct work and support children who go missing and/or are at risk of exploitation. The level of risk is assessed and monitored at multi-agency meetings to ensure that robust safety plans are in place to reduce risk.
10. Senior leaders have a sound oversight of children missing education and of those who are electively home educated. These children are monitored regularly, and appropriate action is taken to safeguard children if needed.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

11. Children enter care appropriately and when it is in their best interests. This includes children recently admitted and those who have been in care for some time. Decisions are proportionate to children's needs and risks and are overseen

by senior managers. Care proceedings work is completed promptly and to a high standard, preventing delay for children.

12. Children receive bespoke care planning when they enter care, ensuring that their needs are understood and met. Planning starts early and is carefully phased, ensuring that children experience a smooth transition into adult social care services if necessary.
13. Careful and thorough assessments and plans underpin well-balanced decisions for the growing number of children who are returning home from care. The preferred model of practice is being introduced into 'going home' work, with adult workers supporting parents to address issues that have a negative impact on their parenting.
14. Updated annual assessments ensure that most children's emerging and changing needs are understood and considered in their reviews and care plans.
15. Children are helped to keep in touch with family members. Arrangements are made in the best interests of children and are reviewed when necessary.
16. Care plans comprehensively identify and address children's needs. Most children either attend or actively participate in their reviews and their views are highlighted in their plans. Many children are supported through easy access to advocacy and independent visitors. Children's plans are diligently reviewed by their independent reviewing officers (IROs), who write sensitive, short and informative letters to them to explain decisions. IROs' oversight and influence on children's lives between their formal statutory reviews are variable and evidence of their challenge and curiosity is limited.
17. Most children live with long-term foster carers in or close to Portsmouth. They receive secure, loving care through to adulthood. A small number of children, who have come into care more recently, have experienced several moves as a result of unsuccessful placement matching. The effectiveness of children's permanence planning is routinely interrogated by senior managers at quarterly quality assurance outcome meetings. A small number of children's care plans and records do not identify emerging permanence plans with sufficient clarity at children's second looked after reviews.
18. Meetings are held when difficulties arise between children and their carers. This supports carers to cope with children's complexities and challenges. Regular network meetings are held concerning some children. These meetings alert teams around the children to emerging difficulties at early stages and provide the opportunity to stabilise their living arrangements.
19. Children in care are visited regularly by social workers, who develop a good understanding of their wishes and feelings. This is achieved through engaging and thoughtful direct work, some of which is therapeutic and trauma-informed.

Most of this work is well documented in lively and personal records written to children, which document what happened and why decisions were taken.

20. Senior leaders have good oversight of the circumstances of the very small number of children living in unregistered settings; these settings are monitored regularly. Leaders have recently decided that a member of their team will visit each child living in an unregistered home, to provide an additional layer of assurance.
21. Children's health is reviewed annually, and most initial health assessments are completed promptly after they come into care. Physical health needs are addressed, and children's emotional needs are met in a variety of ways, congruent with their individual needs, wishes and personalities. This nuanced, bespoke approach helps many children to improve their mental and emotional health. A dedicated child and adolescent mental health service for children in care provides important advice and offers consultations to social workers and carers, alongside some direct work with children.
22. When children go missing from care and are at risk of exploitation, risks are comprehensively assessed through regular strategy meetings, child exploitation risk assessments and multi-agency meetings and reviews. Disruption tools, such as child abduction warning notices, are sometimes deployed. Not all of this work is uploaded to children's records. For some children, it is difficult to track the impact of some of these measures in subsequently reducing risks to children and diverting them from exploitation. Some return home conversations are not held promptly enough or routinely uploaded to children's records. Most interviews are timely but some lack depth and detail. It is not always clear how they inform plans and reduce risks to children. These issues have already been identified by senior leaders as areas for improvement and plans are in place to tackle weaknesses and monitor progress.
23. A recently established specialist team provides a rapid and effective response to newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Their sometimes arduous and traumatic journeys are well understood, as well as the dangers they may have encountered in their countries of origin. Suitable and well-matched placements are obtained for most children, often reflecting their cultural heritage and preferences. Most live with foster parents who provide warm, nurturing family settings. Placing children in semi-independent or independent placements is avoided whenever possible. Health assessments, and support for children in lodging their asylum applications, are offered promptly.
24. Aspirations for children in care are high. The virtual school provides useful and effective help for children, their families and the professionals who support them. As a result, children who come into care attend school more regularly, learn better and improve their behaviours. Nevertheless, virtual school leaders recognise where there is more to do and go about their work with tenacity and determination.

25. The sufficiency of foster carers has improved. The ongoing development of foster carers working in supportive units is a strength of the service. It is a key initiative in supporting fostering households, and an incentive in carer recruitment. The majority of carers feel supported by their workers. However, training is not so accessible for foster carers in other employment, and the route for progression to become a 'career grade' foster carer is not always clear. This is an area that is currently being reviewed. Most foster carers are not recording daily logs regarding children in their care, so there is no clear record of children's progress or critical incidents. The panel chair is positive about the quality of assessments, which are presented on time.
26. There are close links between the council and the regional adoption agency, Adopt South, and they work well together to promote the needs of children. Adoption social workers know their families well. This is reflected in their presentations to panel and the good quality of their reports. Thorough matching reflects children's needs and considers how adopters will address them. The sufficiency of adopters who can meet children's needs has been strengthened since Portsmouth joined Adopt South, and permanence is achieved earlier for many children.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

27. The pace of change and progress for care leavers has been too slow. Although the care leaver offer is currently under review, the ambition across the council and with partners to achieve more as corporate parents for care leavers is too limited.
28. There is a clearly defined service improvement plan and managers do know their services well. However, several of the current areas for service development were identified at the time of the last inspection in 2018 in respect of care leavers' health histories, education, employment and training, and accommodation options. While many care-experienced young people do make good progress in many aspects of their lives and receive high-quality support from committed and caring personal advisers, too many are still not achieving consistently good enough outcomes.
29. There is an active and expanding participation offer in the council and care-experienced young people are regularly involved in participation and consultation events. These are used well to help inform service development plans. Care-experienced young people also help with staff interviews and training, and some have attended the corporate parenting board to share their views. Six-weekly 'connect' activity sessions are held to encourage more care leavers to get involved to help shape the support and services available. Leaders are currently updating the offer in consultation with care-experienced young people.

30. The current care leaver offer sets out the practical and financial support and entitlements available, and helpfully signposts care-experienced young people to relevant support and services. Financial entitlements are being updated. However, discretionary payments are not clearly defined to help care leavers to understand what they can request help with, and essentials, such as access to Wi-Fi and driving lessons, are not included. Some care-experienced young people are already benefiting from the new financial offer, including the introduction of a council tax exemption, but this exemption is not an inclusive offer and only applies to those care leavers living within the local authority.
31. The offer for care-experienced young people who are young parents is underdeveloped and not all care-experienced young people spoken to were aware of their full entitlements. Although care-experienced young people have access to the family hubs, they do not have their own space to meet, such as a community space, when they need immediate help with practical aspects such as showering, cooking, laundry facilities, food items or simply need advice and guidance.
32. Most care-experienced young people are supported well by committed and caring personal advisers, up to the age of 25 years. Personal advisers are allocated to children in care at the age of 16/17 years and are able to build meaningful relationships before becoming their key workers at 18 years. Despite regular visits and attempts at keeping in touch, contact is lost with too many care-experienced young people.
33. Personal advisers are passionate about the support they provide and are rightly proud to celebrate the achievements of care-experienced young people. They are strong advocates who provide appropriate challenge to get the right type of help and services that care-experienced young people need.
34. Most care-experienced young people participate in some way in their pathway plans, which focus on the important aspects of their lives. The quality of plans is variable, but most identify needs well, they are reviewed regularly and updated when situations change. Care-experienced young people are supported to maintain and re-establish important relationships with family and friends, including brothers and sisters. Many are helped to gain the practical skills they need to live safely and successfully as young adults and have most of the important documentation they need for independent living.
35. Most care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation which is safe and meets their needs. However, a small but significant number of care-experienced young people live in unsuitable accommodation. Personal advisers recognise the importance of safe, secure and suitable housing and are determined in their efforts to try to achieve better accommodation for all. The strategic approach to homelessness does not yet safeguard care-experienced young people from being found intentionally homeless or being housed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Despite a weekly housing panel, this has not achieved change for a small number of young people.

36. Care-experienced young people in custody receive a good level of support and are regularly visited by their personal advisers. They receive some financial assistance and the majority benefit from planned accommodation to help to provide the certainty they need to restart their lives within the community.
37. Care-experienced young people who are or were seeking asylum receive good support to help them prepare and adjust to living in their communities. They are supported in all aspects of their development, and they also have support to trace and contact family members and, where possible, to be reunited with their families.
38. Progress has been too slow in ensuring that robust systems are in place to provide care-experienced young people with information about their childhood health histories. Personal advisers are unable to identify which care leavers have access to this important and essential information; this issue was highlighted in the 2018 inspection. Current health needs are met and care leavers who need support with their emotional well-being and mental health can access a bespoke well-being health offer. Personal advisers advocate for and support care leavers to access appropriate adult mental health services and advocate for a small number of young people whose health impacts on their capacity to access help.
39. Personal advisers understand risk and vulnerabilities for care-experienced young people and take appropriate actions to help safeguard them. A new transitional safeguarding panel is bringing multi-agency partners together to manage risk as a collective and to help identify the right support to meet their needs. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this service. Some personal advisers also make good use of risk assessments to inform interventions and support to a small number of care-experienced young people who are vulnerable to criminal exploitation or who present a risk to other members of the community. However, risk is not always explicitly considered, for example for care-experienced young people who are living in bed and breakfast accommodation.
40. The number of care-experienced young people in education, employment or training is too low. This was identified in the 2018 inspection and remains a concern. While many care-experienced young people are supported in their ambitions and helped to engage in education, employment and training, this has not led to tangible improvements. Leaders have plans to develop an employment academy and create more employment and apprenticeship opportunities, but these are not yet in place. Care-experienced young people told inspectors that they want more opportunities. For example, there is currently only one apprenticeship available for care-experienced young people within the council. Many care-experienced young people applied for this role, showing the level of interest in such opportunities.

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

41. The stability of the senior leadership team and a determination to get things right for children have underpinned the ongoing progress. Senior leaders know themselves well and understand their strengths and the areas that need improving.
42. Children and family services benefit from strong cross-party political support. This has resulted in major investment to implement the chosen model of social care practice and the development of the foster carer groups to support children in care. These initiatives have both significantly improved services for children and families. Senior leaders began to implement this transformation at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic has led to delays in implementing this approach in children in care services, where work is now beginning as part of the 'Going Home' project.
43. The chief executive, lead member and the senior leadership team champion children, families and young people's needs and educate the wider council to raise awareness of their corporate parenting responsibilities through training and induction. There is more work to be done to create and implement a 'one council approach', particularly in response to the needs of care-experienced young people.
44. Partnership working has been strengthened, particularly with health, which has enabled leaders to expand opportunities for health and social care, such as the health offer within the family hubs in early help and direct adult services work and involvement within the family safeguarding teams.
45. The chief executive and the lead member for children's services are well informed about the work of children's services and the safeguarding partnership and are keen to understand the impact of their decision-making on practice. This has led, for example, to the lead member for children's services spending time with foster carers, the children in care council, social work teams and the youth cabinet to seek their views. As a result of the findings from these meetings, leaders supported young people to set up a mental health conference, where young people could ask questions and scrutinise decision-making.
46. Supporting children and young people to reach their potential in education and employment has been an area of focus for leaders and managers. Ongoing work by the virtual school to reduce the non-attendance and exclusion rates for children in care has led to these figures slowly reducing. The proportion of care-experienced young people who are in education, employment and training is lower than in other similar authorities, and leaders have plans to address this. However, despite a strong sense of aspiration, this is not reflected in outcomes. There are plans to expand opportunities in September via in-house internships, traineeships, and the launch of an academy. Partnership working with schools is

strong, continuing the links set up during the pandemic; these have strengthened further and have supported positive relationships, benefiting children and their families.

47. Early help services are a strength. Targeted support in early help services reduces escalation to statutory services. The early help offer, supported by qualified social workers, has provided a strong and accessible service to significantly improve the lives of children, young people and their families.
48. Leaders have increased in-house fostering provision and are continuing to expand their foster care model. Long-term placement stability rates are a strength. Portsmouth has two children's homes, both homes being recently inspected with positive outcomes. The regulatory team praised the interventions for children living in these homes, which are improving their experiences and progress significantly. However, not all care-experienced young people have access to a range of accommodation suitable to meet their needs.
49. Children's participation is actively encouraged and promoted. Numerous forums and initiatives seek children's views and involve them in issues that matter to them. The children in care council and care-experienced forum are dynamic, inclusive bodies and are highly influential. Senior leaders are well sighted on topics raised by children and care-experienced young people through an effective corporate parenting board and other ways of receiving feedback. Children told inspectors very convincingly that more decisive responses could be made to tackle some of their more pressing, recurrent concerns, such as being visited at their schools in school time, and dissatisfaction that their social workers leave without planned introductions and handovers to their successors.
50. Portsmouth's leaders are ambitious for their workforce to be trained and effective practitioners. The chosen model of practice has become strongly embedded in the work with children and families and workers have been trained and supported in this approach. The multidisciplinary model has improved outcomes for children and reduced harm, and feedback from families to inspectors was overwhelmingly positive.
51. Portsmouth has a robust performance management framework, giving managers a range of systems to monitor practice across services. Leaders know themselves well and their self-evaluation of practice is robust. Some weaknesses remain within the services for care-experienced young people, although the core practice and commitment of the personal advisers are strong. Improvements to services for these care-experienced young people are dependent on the whole council working together to fulfil their responsibilities as corporate parents.
52. Historically, Portsmouth children's services have experienced stability in the workforce. However, over the past year, leaders have begun to experience the challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced staff which are also seen nationally. In response to recruitment challenges, leaders have

increased the well-being, training and support offer within the workforce. The principal social worker is looking at developing other potential career progressions, such as advanced practitioner roles and wider training opportunities.

53. Social workers talk positively about working in Portsmouth and inspectors consistently heard about their loyalty and commitment to the service. Agency staff feel valued and supported, and they have accessible training. Newly qualified workers are choosing to stay and work in Portsmouth and all workers feel supported by frontline practice managers. Portsmouth is a centre for learning and practitioners benefit from a comprehensive workforce development offer, including the Portsmouth Stronger Futures Academy, for the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), and a newly developed second year in practice programme for post-ASYE social workers to support the implementation of the Portsmouth model of family practice.

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