

Inspection of Southampton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 5 to 16 June 2023

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children and families in Southampton have improved substantially since the previous inspection in 2019, when overall effectiveness was judged as requires improvement to be good. Impressive strategic and operational leadership, aligned with corporate and political commitment, has provided a clear vision, ambition and energy which has garnered the confidence and commitment of key partners. There is a collective momentum to continue to improve services and outcomes for children across the city.

The building blocks to improve the experiences and progress of children have been put firmly in place. Highly effective recruitment throughout the service has resulted in an almost fully permanent workforce. This means that children are supported by practitioners who have the capacity to visit them regularly and to listen to what they say about their lives. Workers coordinate effective multi-agency plans that reflect children's needs and provide a framework for families and partners to support and monitor the progress that children make.

Senior leaders are meaningfully engaged with children, families and partners. They have created a robust performance information infrastructure which, alongside a firmly embedded and comprehensive audit programme, enables them

to maintain a clear line of sight on children's experiences. They have an accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses, and know where to focus their attention to continue to improve practice.

What needs to improve?

- An increase in placement sufficiency, including short-breaks provision for disabled children.
- Ongoing work with health partners to improve the timeliness of initial health assessments and dental checks for children in care.
- The quality and effectiveness of support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as well as housing, education, employment and training for all care leavers.
- Identification, assessment and support for children in private fostering arrangements.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection receive a timely and effective service. Practitioners work well with children, families and other agencies to develop their understanding of children's needs and to create plans that provide support to children and reduce the risks that they face.
2. When contacts are made to the children's resource service, information officers and specialist 'navigators' in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) work rapidly with partner agencies to gather current and previous information about children. This enables a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences to be established and underpins decisions about the level of support needed. When the threshold for statutory services is not met, advice and signposting or a timely handover to early help services are provided. The seeking or overriding of parental consent is understood and consistently applied by social workers and managers.
3. Thresholds for statutory intervention are applied appropriately. Partner agencies also show a clear understanding of and confidence in threshold decision-making. Managers and social workers are very alert to the range of risks that children can face, including from child exploitation, gang violence and domestic abuse, and make decisions accordingly.
4. Rigorous and frequent management oversight of initial contacts and at critical decision-making points provides robust reassurance that children are receiving the support that they need. Management rationale for decisions on contacts and referrals is appropriate and clearly recorded on children's records. Managers provide associated guidance that assists the social workers in their planning. When risks are higher than those seen at first,

concerns are escalated quickly so that the most appropriate response is provided at the earliest point. Partners have increased confidence that there will be a timely and effective response to their referrals.

5. Many children's situations are improved through early help services. Children and families benefit from the wide range of early help services available from different agencies. Early help assessments are thorough; they identify needs clearly and lead to the creation of specific, measurable and timely early help plans. Services are mobilised quickly to prevent potential drift. Family support workers spend a considerable amount of time building relationships with children and their families to develop trust and engagement. As a result, many children make sustainable progress.
6. Help offered to families is at the least intrusive level, but when concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to engage statutory services.
7. Well-attended multi-agency strategy meetings are used effectively to understand the situations for children at risk of significant harm. Detailed records of these meetings make clear the rationale and evidence base for decisions. Plans established at strategy meetings include the immediate steps needed to make children safer.
8. Section 47 investigations are timely and focus on the impact of potential harm to children, including from physical and emotional abuse and contextual safeguarding risks. Social workers are skilled and experienced in identifying different types of risks, including female genital mutilation, honour-based violence and risks from radicalisation. When there are concerns about exploitation, CERAFs (comprehensive child exploitation risk assessment frameworks) are completed in order to establish effective individual plans that mitigate potential harm.
9. Effective action is being taken by senior leaders and partners to address the impact of chronic neglect. A multi-agency neglect tool kit that helps partners identify and understand the impact of neglect has been developed and is being used across agencies. However, there are still a small number of children who have been in neglectful circumstances for too long. Senior managers were already aware of this and have been taking appropriate action.
10. Responses to children who go missing and are at risk of all forms of exploitation are robust. Social workers and the MET (missing and exploitation team) support children through the completion of mostly timely and thorough return home interviews and additional visiting, to understand motivations and patterns for episodes of children going missing. ROTH (risk outside the home) conferences involve parents, carers and partner agencies, who share information and develop plans to reduce risks. Children on the

edge of care are supported with timely and appropriate help to keep them within their family networks.

11. The BIT (brief intervention team) provides a dedicated and timely assessment and intervention service. Social workers complete thorough assessments, making good use of family history and multi-agency information to appraise risks. This helps to identify family strengths and to understand repeating patterns of behaviour. Absent fathers are routinely considered in the assessment process.
12. Social workers develop child-in-need and child protection plans that set out appropriate actions to help children and to make them safer. Most children make progress and harm is reduced because of the multi-agency approach and the creative services, including from substance misuse and domestic abuse practitioners, that are provided to reduce risks. Plans are updated as children's circumstances change. Contingency plans are agreed from the outset, to avoid drift and delay.
13. Social workers hold core group meetings and child-in-need review meetings regularly so that families and partner agencies can assess the progress that is being made for children. These meetings provide an effective forum to share information and to update plans as required.
14. When children's situations do not improve or they become less safe, decisive action is taken to escalate to pre-proceedings arrangements in accordance with the Public Law Outline, or for children to enter care if they need this in an emergency. Pre-proceedings letters to parents are written respectfully, offering high support and high challenge. They are clear about the services provided, what needs to change and the consequences if children's circumstances do not improve.
15. Intense and skilful support is provided to children and their families by the intervention and complex assessment service (ICAS). This impressive, agile and dynamic service delivers positive outcomes for many children, leading to fewer proceedings and enabling children to safely remain with their families. This service also delivers long-term support to families who have been through the family drug and alcohol court, bolstering the likelihood of children successfully staying in the care of their families.
16. Disabled children in need of help and protection receive a holistic, high-quality service that covers all aspects of the care that they need. Visits to children are well recorded and include observations of carers' interactions with children. Social workers supporting disabled children understand their needs and speak about them with warmth and enthusiasm. However, access to short breaks or respite care arrangements is limited and is insufficient to meet demand. Leaders have recognised this shortfall and are undertaking a comprehensive review of the short-breaks offer.

17. Children receive purposeful visits from their social workers and they are seen alone. Most workers capture children's words in carefully constructed records of visits, written in the form of a letter that is respectful and celebrates each child and their achievements, no matter how small. Supplementary statements from managers using the same approach provide clarity about the reasons for important decisions.
18. Visits are in line with children's needs and risk levels. Workers use eclectic and imaginative ways to engage children well. However, this direct work is not always evident on children's records. Children's views are used to inform their plans. Their culture, identity and language are well considered.
19. An effective local authority designated officer (LADO) service provides prompt and appropriate advice and decision-making when concerns arise about professionals. However, within the fostering service, inspectors identified occasions when referrals were not made to the LADO as swiftly as they should have been.
20. The out-of-hours service responds appropriately to children's needs but a lack of capacity means that, in a small number of cases, the service is not always timely. This issue has been identified and changes are being made to the structure of the service.
21. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are seen quickly. Services designed in conjunction with housing teams mean that immediate decisions are taken if children need emergency accommodation. Children's wishes and feelings are always considered. Practitioners recognise and address factors that make children vulnerable, and determined efforts are made to resolve difficulties with family relationships. In recognition of the vulnerability of these children, child exploitation risk assessments are routinely undertaken to inform safety plans.
22. The response to children in private fostering arrangements is weak. Arrangements to raise awareness and identify children who are privately fostered are underdeveloped. There is insufficient management oversight and there are minimal quality assurance systems in place, which mean that there is sometimes delay in assessing these arrangements.
23. Robust processes and systems are in place to track and safeguard children educated at home or missing from education. There is effective and close working between officers to safeguard children when concerns are identified and to ensure that children are not lost from sight.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

24. Improvements to the quality of support provided to children in care have accelerated recently. Careful and successful workforce recruitment, a comprehensive strategy to improve children's placement stability and an

impressive level of meaningful engagement by senior leaders with children in care all provide a firm foundation for further improvements.

25. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate, although a small number of children have waited too long in neglectful circumstances before coming into care.
26. There is thoughtful and careful placement selection. This includes an appropriate and determined ambition to place children with members of their family network as assessed and supported connected carers, when it is safe and in children's best interests to do so.
27. Most children's care plans are individualised and specific, measurable and timely. However, a small number are too generic and do not include contingency or early permanence planning.
28. Children live with carers who understand their needs and provide them with care and safety. However, some children experience multiple moves in short periods of time, impacting on their ability to form stable relationships and sometimes disrupting their schooling. Extensive activity at a strategic level is in place to address this. Placement stability meetings are now held frequently, helping to deliver rapid and effective support when there are concerns that children may have to move.
29. When children return home to live with their parents, this is carefully considered and based on comprehensive assessments that are approved by senior officers. Reunification is achieved with carefully supported transition plans that deliver reassurance and support to families.
30. Children are supported to remain with their foster carers after the age of 18 when this is right for them. A high number remain in 'staying put' arrangements in order to maintain their relationships and stability.
31. Children are visited regularly, including those living outside of Southampton and at distance. Social workers' records of visits are clear and thoughtfully written to the child, with great sensitivity and kindness, helping them to have insight into their experiences. They record high-quality information about how children are making progress. Social workers and practitioners celebrate children's achievements and champion their rights, to help them to access new experiences, including work experience.
32. Children have good access to advocacy and independent visiting services and this has provided some children with valuable and meaningful support from trusted adults who have known them over long periods of time. Children in care are proud that their voices are heard, including through Southampton Voices Unite and the executive board. Senior leaders are impressively visible and accessible to children and care leavers.

33. Children are helped by workers to keep safe online and to develop their own identity and celebrate who they are. Children are encouraged and supported to take up hobbies or to join clubs that they are interested in. Each child and young person receives a handmade personalised cake on their birthday.
34. A lean and effective virtual school provides significant input that helps children to do their best in education. Children's personal education plans are robustly quality assured. Staff at the virtual school have embraced the increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, taking into account their individual needs, as opposed to viewing them as a separate cohort.
35. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high-quality support and accommodation to help them to reach their goals. For a small number, there is variability in the quality of records. A very small number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children told inspectors about feeling lonely and described infrequent communication and a lack of clarity about their plans. Senior leaders are aware of these issues and are putting plans in place to improve their experiences.
36. Initial health assessments and dental checks are not completed swiftly enough. However, children receive more consistently timely annual health assessments.
37. Most statutory reviews are held within timescale. Many children attend their reviews and meet or speak with their independent reviewing officers (IROs) between reviews. IROs maintain frequent and authoritative oversight of children's progress and provide an additional mechanism to ensure that agreed plans are being delivered.
38. Recruitment and retention of foster carers is a key priority area. Successful recruitment is not yet leading to a larger pool of carers because of the numbers who are leaving the service. Leaders know that tighter oversight is needed to ensure the quality and timeliness of support provided to foster carers.
39. Adoption for children, achieved through membership of the regional adoption agency (Adopt South), continues to be a strength, with strong support for adoptive parents leading to low levels of adoption breakdown. The importance of life-story work is recognised by social workers, who carry out both traditional work to help children to understand their journey into care and more comprehensive and therapeutic life-story work.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

40. Services for care leavers have been redesigned and most care leavers now receive a good service. However, many children are not allocated personal advisers early enough to build a trusting relationship with them before they

become 18, when they face many significant changes in their life. Personal advisers make frequent contact once they are allocated, in order to get to know the young people they are supporting. They provide practical help and care leavers trust them to provide support, particularly when they have experienced traumatic events or are going through difficult times in their lives. Care leavers report feeling safe with their advisers and ask for help with a range of health issues, including support to access and attend essential mental or physical health services.

41. Case recordings do not reflect all that advisers do for the care leavers they support. Inspectors saw frequent and warm electronic messages that provided an insight into the high quality of the relationships that advisers build, covering everything from sharing the local offer to celebrating small successes.
42. Pathway plans are completed and reviewed with care leavers; their goals are clearly captured in meaningful discussions and form the basis of plans to improve outcomes. Most care leavers are in possession of their important documents when they reach 18.
43. Care leavers access the clear and refreshed local offer and are positive about it. The care leavers' forum is ambitious, although not all care leavers have a good understanding of the forum and of the corporate parenting board.
44. Care leavers have helped to create an impressive meeting space in the Hub, in the council offices, where they, and other young people from across their service, have the opportunity to access services, advice and support, as well as to meet and spend time with friends in a safe and welcoming environment. Inspectors saw how links with Southampton Football Club have benefited care leavers who enjoy football. Others enjoy attending a wide range of other activities, such as Pride events and boxing and cricket.
45. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers experience high-quality support to help them to reach their goals, including attending college and applying to university. Their identity needs are well considered and practitioners are acutely aware of the impact of the trauma that many have experienced in their lives.
46. Planning to support disabled children in care to make successful transitions to adulthood is effective. The children benefit from timely allocation of personal advisers and this helps to bridge the gap between children's and adults' services.
47. Care leavers who are parents are well supported. Careful planning to meet their needs includes good consideration of their wider networks. Once they have been able to demonstrate that they can live independently and manage their own tenancy agreements, they are given additional housing points. This

makes a significant difference and means they can swiftly obtain a council property that meets their needs as parents.

48. Care leavers in custody receive good support. Personal advisers continue to visit and offer encouragement, advocacy and financial and emotional support. There is good forward planning to ensure that needs, including housing, are identified well in advance of release dates. Care leavers who are vulnerable to exploitation are provided with help that reflects and mitigates the risks that they face.
49. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer care leavers are supported sensitively and skilfully by workers and leaders.
50. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, their personal advisers work tirelessly to identify and support opportunities that will provide them with valuable experience. Links have been made with businesses and organisations; these have led to the creation of more work experience opportunities and apprenticeships, including within the council.
51. Although care leavers who are in education, employment or training have access to travel passes and electronic equipment such as laptops, those who are not engaged in this way only receive this equipment on a case-by-case basis. This disadvantages some care leavers, including many who need the most help to access suitable opportunities.
52. There has been a recent growth in housing options, including a new 'staying close to home' arrangement, and further developments and initiatives are being introduced. 'Staying put' arrangements are well used and encouraged, helping care leavers to succeed and go on to hold successful tenancies. Brothers and sisters benefit from staying together longer. 'Staying put' arrangements are helping care leavers with complex long-term plans manage their move to adult services.

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

53. The current leadership team of children's services in Southampton has worked collectively to significantly improve the experiences and progress of children in the city. The chief executive, corporate leaders and elected members rightly prioritise children. The executive director and his senior leadership team have created a clear vision, showing ambition and energy, and have garnered the confidence and commitment of key partners. All aspects of the service are now at a good level and are continuing to improve, which is a considerable achievement, given that the service has a long history of requiring improvement.

54. Leaders demonstrate high ambition for children across the city, children in care and care leavers. The corporate commitment to children includes a determination to continue to make and sustain further improvements to the lives of the most vulnerable.
55. Reliable and accurate performance information and the comprehensive audit programme that has been put in place enable senior leaders to maintain a clear line of sight on children's experiences. Leaders have an accurate and comprehensive understanding of strengths and weaknesses across the service.
56. Senior leaders are visible and accessible to the children and families they support, as well as to their workforce. They are meaningfully engaged with children and families, and they act on what children and families say about how support could be improved. The creation of the Hub, and work with parents who have experienced child protection processes, are examples of this.
57. Leaders have developed strong and impactful services. Their work with partners to improve the identification and response to children experiencing neglect shows that they do not shy away from ingrained and difficult challenges.
58. There is an embedded culture of learning and development across the organisation. Leaders are open to external scrutiny; they actively seek opportunities to improve services through innovation and are keen to learn from others. Thoughtfully commissioned training and development opportunities are widely available to the workforce. Staff spoke with enthusiasm about the way in which recent training has impacted on and improved their practice.
59. A significant feature of the changes that leaders have delivered has been the lifting of the morale of the workforce and creating a culture in which staff work compassionately and collaboratively with families and partner agencies.
60. Practitioners have manageable caseloads and this enables them to visit children regularly, build trusting relationships and improve children's circumstances. Staff write their notes to children or parents with impressive sensitivity and care.
61. Practitioners are supported by energetic and responsive frontline managers who maintain clear, confident and close oversight of children's progress. Managers regularly and frequently contribute to children's records. They are accountable and help their staff to do the right things. Senior leaders maintain tight oversight of the small number of children who are placed, by necessity, in unregistered children's homes.
62. Staff across children's services like working in Southampton. They value the fact that they are listened to and they enjoy the easy access they have to

senior leaders. They told inspectors about the way in which leaders celebrate their achievements, as well as holding them to account.

63. Leaders are not complacent and remain committed to delivering further sustainable improvement to the support that is provided to children and their families.

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