

Inspection of St Helens local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 21 July 2023

Lead inspector: Russel Breyer, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since a judgement of inadequate for overall effectiveness at the last inspection in 2019, St Helens children's services have been on an improvement journey. Monitoring visits found that this was initially too slow in delivering improvements for children. A new senior leadership team began work in 2022. Since then, there has been a determination to improve at pace, and a renewed focus and impetus which has led to significant improvements in all areas. Children and young people in St Helens now benefit from much better help, support and care. Concerns are identified and addressed more swiftly, and children's situations improve.

Leaders have improved their understanding of the quality of frontline practice by developing a robust quality assurance framework, by ensuring that they hear regularly from the children's workforce and from children, young people and their families, and by engaging in peer reviews. This has led them to invest in improving practice and in developing specialist roles and resources that are effective in helping children and their families.

Children's needs are identified and responded to swiftly at the lowest possible level. Most problems are prevented from escalating. When concerns do escalate,

immediate action is taken to safeguard children. Children who are looked after by St Helens make good progress and young people who are leaving care receive outstanding support. However, some children in St Helens have experienced neglect for too long, and service improvements are not leading to better experiences for all children. Leaders have credible and realistic plans to further improve service effectiveness.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of the response to children experiencing neglect.
- The timeliness of entering into pre-proceedings for children who need this support.
- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless.
- The stability and consistency of children's social workers.
- Safeguarding of disabled children.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Early help partnership coordinators support partners to make appropriate referrals. They promote a collaborative approach to wraparound support for families. Requests for support and early help are mostly appropriate, and thresholds are well understood. Most needs are met at an early stage before they escalate. Step up and step down between levels of support is appropriate, with routine management oversight and recording of rationale. Signposting to other services that may help families takes place when early help services are not required.
2. Decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is timely and proportionate to need. This ensures that children receive the right level of statutory or voluntary support. The MASH applies thresholds well and undertakes dynamic screening so that the level of service is changed if new information is received. Parental consent is quickly obtained, or dispensed with, appropriately.
3. The out-of-hours service works swiftly and effectively across the full range of work to protect children.
4. The initial response to children at risk of significant harm is prompt. Strategy meetings are well attended. Section 47 enquiries are thorough and timely. Risk is appropriately addressed in most cases. Decisions to progress to a child protection conference are not always accepted by child protection chairs, and a small number of children who later require a child protection conference to be held experience delay in accessing the help they need at the appropriate level.

5. Children who need longer-term support following a child protection conference transfer to the assessment service without delay and, for these children, social workers are promptly allocated.
6. Most assessments of children's situations are comprehensive and are updated in line with changing need. Social workers engage with families well. Assessments give an understanding of need and risk which supports effective planning. Management oversight and regular supervision ensure timely progress of assessments. For a small number of children, the assessment is not informed by family history.
7. Social workers undertake purposeful direct work with children, which gives a good understanding of children's lived experience, and with families, which helps them to address their difficulties. Resources such as family intervention workers are also used to support families.
8. Plans for children are mostly well focused, with clear measures of progress. Plans are regularly reviewed and updated. These reduce risk for children in most cases. Child protection reviewing officers engage families effectively in planning, but they do not always challenge management decisions when these are not effective in achieving progress for children.
9. Some children suffering neglect have repeated or lengthy child protection plans, which means that for them the neglect has not been effectively addressed. More recent episodes of child protection planning for these children receive a high level of management oversight and commitment of resources to try to bring about change, although this is still not always effective.
10. When children experience persistent neglect, there is sometimes over-optimism by social workers about parents' capacity to change. Disguised compliance is not always recognised. Some casework lacks professional curiosity. Social workers and managers do not always fully recognise risks to children living with parental substance misuse, domestic abuse or poor mental health. Not all children are escalated into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline when the threshold is met.
11. When pre-proceedings are started, the required work is done swiftly and progress is robustly tracked. Assessments are completed and families supported prior to pre-proceedings. Most children are successfully diverted from proceedings. Regular reviews ensure that progress is maintained.
12. Edge of care services achieve positive outcomes for some families, who are enabled to exit proceedings or have their children successfully returned home, although not all interventions achieve timely change. Leaders have plans to develop this service.

13. Some children do not move to longer-term teams when they need to, due to capacity issues. Some have experienced too many changes of social worker. These issues impact children's ability to form meaningful relationships with social workers, which delays their progress.
14. Most disabled children have their needs met at an appropriate level. Multi-agency working takes place to address and reduce risk. However, safeguarding actions do not take place for all children and not all are safeguarded effectively.
15. Disabled children are sensitively helped to understand their day-to-day arrangements. They are provided with a range of help and support which promotes their social development and provides them with opportunities to participate in their community.
16. Children at risk of radicalisation have their needs considered by an established multi-agency panel. Services for these children are joined up across partnerships and areas of risk. A development officer raises awareness among the children's workforce, which ensures that emerging risks are recognised and receive an early response.
17. Children at risk of exploitation are identified and responded to effectively. Daily complex safeguarding meetings consider children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation. Return home interviews explore risks effectively but are not always timely. Plans are regularly reviewed at multi-agency child exploitation meetings to protect children and reduce risk. Specialist workers in the complex safeguarding team undertake creative direct work with children and support partners to help reduce risk.
18. The local authority designated officer service responds promptly to referrals, ensuring that cases are progressed appropriately, and that partners and employers are supported to understand and address risk in the children's workforce.
19. Children who are privately fostered are identified and receive good oversight. Planning for them promotes improved outcomes and permanence.
20. 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are provided with emergency accommodation pending assessment by a social worker and housing colleagues. Not all are presented with positive choices about their options or offered accommodation as a child in care in a timely way when they should be.
21. Children who are missing from school receive effective oversight. Creative lines of enquiry are used to locate them. Active links with schools ensure that information is shared when there is any suggestion of a child going missing from school.

22. Children who are electively home educated receive effective oversight of their needs. When concerns are raised about a child, swift action is taken.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

23. Services in St Helens provide effective support which enables children to remain living at home with their families when it is safe for them to do so. Children come into care when necessary to keep them safe. This is often prompted by crisis. For some children, their need to enter care could be better anticipated and planned.
24. Thorough family court social work assessments are reducing the need for expert assessments. This is contributing to improved timescales and, as a result, decisions about children's long-term plans are made sooner.
25. Children's need for permanence is raised early and is carefully considered for most children in care. Effective tracking helps children achieve permanence in different ways, including reunification to birth families or by special guardianship orders being made to long-term carers. For a small number of children, there is delay in achieving permanence, often related to earlier neglect. Better management oversight and increased independent reviewing officer (IRO) challenge are securing timelier permanence for children.
26. The importance of family relationships to children is recognised. Specialist assessments are strong, including risk assessments, 'together and apart' assessments of brothers and sisters, and reunification assessments.
27. Children return home from care when this is appropriate. Transition plans ensure that families are well supported. For some children, the period of transition is too long and plans do not progress at a pace in line with their wishes and needs.
28. Reviews for children in care are clearly focused on the child's needs and on what is required to ensure they make progress. IROs work flexibly to include children in reviews. They know their children and advocate for them. IRO footprint between reviews is clear.
29. Social workers build good relationships with children and understand trauma and how this impacts on children in care. Children are visited in line with their needs. The voice of the child influences plans. Children told inspectors that they like their social workers, but some had had too many. Life-story work is prioritised and is of good quality for all children.
30. Some children with complex needs experience multiple placement moves. Social workers make concerted and purposeful efforts to stabilise these children's living arrangements.

31. Children's health needs are well considered. Support is given to promote physical and emotional good health. Health reviews provide clear, personalised and detailed overviews.
32. Most children in care make good progress in education. The virtual school works in close partnership with schools to ensure that pupils receive the right provision. Exclusions of children in care are very rare and alternative provision is swiftly made. Most personal education plans are completed to a good standard, although there is some variability in quality, which is being addressed.
33. Children are placed at a distance from St Helens only when there are no local options for them. These children continue to receive effective support and needs-led visits.
34. Children in care who are vulnerable to exploitation are well supported. Children who go missing from care receive an effective response.
35. Disabled children are supported to make the transition into adulthood by a dedicated service which focuses on their individual needs and potential. A joined-up approach with partners and with adult social care ensures a coordinated response to need.
36. Children are placed in unregistered children's homes rarely and only in emergency situations. Local provision is being developed to avoid the need for this. Increased social worker visits and senior management oversight mitigate risk. Robust placement finding ensures that children move swiftly into registered settings. Most 16- and 17-year-olds are appropriately placed in supported accommodation. St Helens proactively works with providers to achieve registration.
37. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are looked after are supported by workers who are sensitive to their cultural needs and experiences. Placements mostly meet children's needs well, and action is taken where they do not, with the child's wishes prioritised where possible. Education, health and social needs are all prioritised by their workers.
38. The fostering service functions well and continues to develop. Carers benefit from regular support and supervision from their supervising social workers. Children say they are happy in the care of their foster carers and feel able to tell them their worries. Challenges around sufficiency have led to investment in foster carer recruitment. An increasing number of approved connected carers means that more children are growing up within their extended families.
39. The regional adoption agency, Together for Children, provides effective adoption arrangements. Foster to adopt and concurrent placements are used to

promote early permanence for some children. Adopters receive good support from St Helens.

40. St Helens celebrates children's successes and hosts participation events for children in care, which they enjoy. Children's voices are seen in records, reviews and bespoke pieces of consultation which help to develop services.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

41. Young people have sufficient time to get to know their personal advisers (PAs) before they leave care. Passionate and highly committed PAs work jointly and proactively with children's social workers from soon after the child's 16th birthday. PAs are patient and tenacious in developing these relationships. They visit regularly but always work at the young person's pace to develop warm, caring and enduring relationships. PAs often go over and above expectations, including responding to calls out of hours and accompanying care leavers to events at the weekend. Young people are helped to develop supportive networks and to develop into independent adults.
42. Young people benefit from accessing additional help, such as emotional well-being support, when they need it. PAs understand young people's vulnerabilities and the impact of adverse life experiences on their health and well-being. PAs actively encourage young people to use support services, but do this so that young people are able to engage in a way that best meets their needs.
43. Care leavers are helped to keep themselves safe through skilled, sensitive direct work. They are supported to make positive choices to reduce risk and need.
44. Care leavers are fully involved in the design of services, such as the care leavers' hub, new flats and residential homes. They enjoy this and feel valued.
45. Young people have their health needs well considered, and all have health passports. Gym memberships are fully funded by the local authority to promote good physical and mental health.
46. Young people benefit from a well-developed website illustrating the local offer. This is easy to navigate, accessible to all and has links to information about entitlements. The local offer is comprehensive. Young people understand what is available to them and access the local offer. There is additional support for young people who are parents, which includes an enhanced setting-up home grant. Council tax is paid for all care leavers, regardless of where they live.
47. Pathway plans are co-produced with young people and are comprehensive. They detail how needs will be met. Plans are reviewed regularly and amended to reflect new and emerging needs and supports. Reports of management

oversight are written directly to the young person, offering encouragement and celebrating success when achievements have been made.

48. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people benefit from sensitive support from their PAs. They are helped to settle and their religious and cultural needs are prioritised. Experiences and trauma are recognised, and efforts are made to secure placements for young people in communities where their beliefs, language, experiences and culture are shared and understood.
49. Care leavers in custody receive regular visits and support from PAs who help them make progress while in prison, and help them to plan towards a successful transition back into the community.
50. Care leavers receive strong and effective support to engage in education, employment or training (EET). This support comes from a range of sources, including the dedicated EET worker, the virtual school and PAs, all of whom are ambitious for their care leavers. Pathway plans are ambitious and have a very strong focus on EET. Young people who are at university are well supported, as are those in training and apprenticeships. The virtual school works effectively alongside the preparing for adulthood and futures teams to prepare young people to take up the opportunities available to them. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training is significantly above that of comparable authorities and above the national average, with good attention also paid to the quality and appropriateness of education and work placements.
51. Most young people live in accommodation that best meets their needs. However, some young people report that location risk assessments should be completed to better identify properties in safer locations, to reduce vulnerabilities. Leaders have committed to addressing these concerns by working with partners to ensure that suitable and safe offers of accommodation are made. Young people who feel vulnerable are able to access services through their PA or via The Hub. Young people are offered 'staying put' arrangements, and shared lives plans are in place for disabled children.
52. Care leavers are provided with opportunities to seek support and help in an informal setting, The Hub, where they engage in a range of activities with their peers. The Hub is highly valued by care leavers who use it well to access a wide range of support, from meeting with specialist workers to collecting donated items and supplies such as new clothing, food and toiletries. For many, The Hub is an important touchstone. Inspectors met with young people in The Hub. The vast majority rated the service that they receive as care leavers '10 out of 10', and were overwhelmingly positive about their PAs.
53. When a young adult turns 21, they make the decision whether they want ongoing support from the local authority. PAs are proactive in encouraging young people to continue to receive a service, and this encouragement continues beyond the age of 21. Those who choose not to receive a service can

easily access support whenever required, by dropping into The Hub and asking for help. However, the support offer to those over the age of 21 is insufficiently clear. Leaders have committed to addressing this. Young people who come back for support are allocated a PA if that is what they want. The service continues to support some young people beyond their 25th birthday. The culture, encouraged by leaders, is that while the support available may change, the relationship between the corporate parent and the young person should continue.

54. All young people are provided with their important documents, such as birth certificates, passports and national insurance numbers.

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

55. Leaders have made children the highest priority in the council's strategic plan and have invested significantly in children's services. Leaders are actively involved in strategic, partnership and performance meetings. They have overseen a dramatic improvement in many service areas, particularly in the last 12 months, and have robustly addressed previous weaknesses.
56. Investment has been committed to increasing workforce capacity and to new services and roles. Leaders have developed a positive and aspirational culture in services for children. The designated family judge reflected that leaders in St Helens invite scrutiny and make effective use of resources.
57. Leaders are well informed about issues affecting children in St Helens. They have access to comprehensive data and maintain close contact with senior managers, the children's workforce and children and young people. They understand areas of challenge and ensure that these are focused on.
58. Strong partner relationships are evident at all levels. Managers from partner agencies attend operational decision-making panels and partners are part of children's services development events. These include police, health and education representatives. Progress has been made with partnership issues that have previously been difficult to resolve, such as a shared understanding and application of thresholds.
59. Leaders are fully engaged corporate parents. The lead member provides significant input into the Corporate Parenting Board, and elected members and partners attend workstreams which develop and improve services. Resources are invested to improve services to children in care and those leaving care. Senior managers know their children in care and care leavers very well.
60. St Helens' self-evaluation accurately reflects developments and challenges in services for children. Leaders know that addressing neglect is a key issue and are taking appropriate action. A clear practice model provides a basis for

moving forward. This is well embedded and is recognised and valued by social workers.

61. Strategic leaders work with operational managers, partners and families to identify vulnerable groups and to develop services in response.
62. Quality assurance arrangements are becoming embedded and are increasingly effective. The arrangements support continually improving practice and services for children and families. Regular performance meetings are chaired by the assistant director. Each service area has access to detailed performance information so they are able to make informed reports on their achievements and challenges, and each has a service action plan to address areas for development. Supportive challenge is provided where actions have not progressed.
63. A system of collaborative case audits gives a good understanding of the quality of practice and of areas for improvement. However, it is not always evident how managers ensure that audit actions are completed and fed back to auditors to complete the circle.
64. Good-quality reflective supervision is prioritised. This is recognised and appreciated by workers. Management footprint is routinely seen on cases. In a small number of cases, management oversight does not provide clear direction to take cases forward.
65. A small number of social workers are supporting over 20 children, which they say makes them feel pressured. The high number of children receiving a service at all points in the system creates some blockages and delays. Examples were seen of children's cases being held for extended periods of time by the duty team. This means that children do not develop relationships with the workers in the longer-term teams who will be providing the help that they need.
66. Social work teams are led by experienced team managers supported by an assistant team manager, which ensures that significant experience is available to the team. Newly qualified social workers are closely supported. They hold reduced caseloads, which increase at an appropriate pace as they gain experience.
67. Training and workforce development are given high priority, to improve services for children and to support workers in developing their practice skills and their careers. Many senior posts are filled from within. An innovative improvement team provides support to social workers and helps to develop practice. There is a dynamic learning culture, which is well recognised and appreciated by social workers.

68. Some of the strengths seen in this inspection were summarised by parents, who told inspectors that they have been helped and that they appreciate what is done with and for them, as well as how this is done.

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