

Inspection of Swindon Borough Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 17 to 28 July 2023

Lead inspector: Nick Bennison, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since Ofsted's last inspection in 2019, there has been a significant deterioration in the quality and impact of services for children in Swindon. There are pockets of strong practice, notably with disabled children, those on the edge of care, those who are privately fostered and by the virtual school. However, too many children are left with unassessed needs and risks and plans that drift, and they experience too many changes of social worker. Children are not matched with permanent carers quickly enough. The new corporate director of children's services has recently led a more rigorous and accurate appraisal of the quality of service provision. With the backing of corporate and political leaders, this has led to work to strengthen services. While this is positive, and demonstrates a strengthened local authority commitment to driving progress in services for children, these developments are largely very recent and had not, at the time of this inspection, had a significant impact.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency and appropriateness with which thresholds for intervention and the provision of support are understood and applied for children in need or at risk of harm.
- How accurately assessments identify children's needs and risks and support the framing of timely and clear plans that match children's circumstances.
- The regularity and effectiveness of management oversight.
- The opportunities for children to build a relationship of trust with a single consistent social worker, rather than experiencing multiple changes of worker.
- The number and range of foster homes and children's homes and other placements the local authority has available, to help ensure that children live in stable homes that are well matched to their needs.
- How quickly children are matched to permanent carers.
- The reliability and effectiveness of systems to record data and records about children and how well these are used to understand and support improvements in practice and services.

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

1. Most children in Swindon who need help or protection do not receive sufficiently effective or timely support. While some children, including those who are disabled, privately fostered or on the edge of care, do receive good services, for most children and families this is inconsistent and for too many the support they receive is poor. This means that children's welfare is not consistently promoted as well as it should be and some children are left in situations where they are at risk of harm or, for a few, suffer harm that could have been avoided.
2. Thresholds for the assessment and provision of services to children who may be at risk of harm or in need are not consistently understood by multi-agency partners, staff and managers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). This means that, too often, children are left in situations where their needs or risks have not been understood. Therefore, some of these children continue to live in need or experience harm and are the subject of repeated referrals before the harm or need is recognised and needs are met. The understanding by staff and managers in the MASH of when to seek, or to override, parental consent is inconsistent and too often this is not applied appropriately or recorded clearly. Children's case records completed in the MASH are not consistently accurate. This makes it more difficult for staff to understand their situations or to make informed decisions about next steps. While thorough background checks are completed by health and education staff in the MASH, for some children, decisions are made to end statutory involvement by social workers without this information having been considered. This means that decisions about support

to children and their families are sometimes taken without all relevant and available information having been considered. When these concerns were raised with the local authority, the senior leadership team took prompt action to review the service and begin to address the issues raised.

3. When concerns about children's welfare and safety arise outside normal working hours, interventions by the emergency duty service are not always effective. Thresholds for intervention are not consistently applied and appropriate checks and actions not always undertaken, leaving some children in situations of ongoing risk or, for a few, continuing to suffer harm.
4. Most children in Swindon benefit from an effective early help offer. Assessments are mostly thorough, and the plans completed are carefully reviewed in multi-agency meetings. This means that most children and their families are receiving timely early help that meets their needs.
5. While the risk of harm to children is not always identified as consistently or as quickly as it could be, when children are recognised as at potential risk of significant harm, child protection strategy meetings are timely and attended by the appropriate professionals. This typically supports effective multi-agency decision-making and decisions about next steps that are appropriate to children's circumstances and needs.
6. Most assessments set out a clear picture of the child's world and identify well the strengths in the family network and those things that need to change. Some do not recognise all the risks children face. This means that for these children, recommendations from assessments are not always complete or consistently matched to their needs and risks.
7. Recognition of the impact of long-term neglect and domestic abuse is variable. The resulting plans for children are often weak. This leads to concerns not being properly addressed and a pattern of re-referrals. Recognition of this area of weakness, in particular in work with children in need, has been one of the factors that led the local authority to create an additional child in need team, staffed with experienced agency staff. Although this recently established team is generally providing a more effective level of support to children, this stronger practice is not, currently, being replicated across all teams.
8. Most child protection conferences have a balanced focus on risks and strengths. Staff from the key agencies attend routinely and the resulting plans are regularly monitored at timely multi-agency meetings. Most children are seen by their social worker at a frequency that matches their needs. Some social workers undertake skilled direct work to gain the child's views. However, in some plans there is too much emphasis on the needs of the adult rather than those of the child. Also, repeated changes of social worker cause drift and delay for some children in how quickly plans are implemented, monitored and developed to reflect children's changing needs.

9. Work in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is effective in ensuring that children who need to come into care do so quickly or, when it is possible to safely avoid the need for care, that they can remain at home with support in place. Letters before proceedings are clear and the work is regularly reviewed to ensure progress.
10. In areas of the service where both child in need and child protection work are undertaken, there is a high turnover of social workers. This means that children are not always able to establish trusting relationships with their social workers. It also leads to drift and delay in the progress of many plans. Management oversight does not consistently give clear direction to social workers. They are not always helped well to recognise the cumulative impact of chronic risks to children, for example, neglect or domestic abuse.
11. Children at risk of extra-familial harm, for example through criminal or child sexual exploitation, do not receive a sufficiently effective service. The frequency of visits and the direct work that is undertaken with children are not sufficiently responsive to the children's changing risks and circumstances. Plans are overly focused on tasks and task completion rather than the impact achieved. This means that direct work and planning with the child are not always having an impact and helping to reduce risk. When children have been missing from home or care, most, but not all, receive a return home interview. When interviews are completed, they are mostly thorough, but learning is not always used well to inform subsequent interventions.
12. There is delay by the local authority in recognising some private fostering arrangements. However, once recognised, children receive a safe, robust and effective service. Assessments are timely and robust, as are checks. Children's views are well considered and decisions about the suitability of carers are made quickly.
13. The needs of children with a disability are consistently well met by the local authority. Joint work with other agencies such as schools and health services is stronger than in other areas of practice. Children's voices are gained through sensitive direct work. Visits are timely and focused and assessment work is responsive to children's changing needs. Relationships are not focused on parents at the expense of children and social workers are not afraid to have challenging conversations. Parents respond well to this and typically make the required changes, even in difficult circumstances.
14. Children who are missing from education are not tracked and monitored effectively. Equally, the mechanism to monitor vulnerable children who are home educated is not effective. Given that parents are not legally required to notify local authorities of their intention to home educate a child, this means that it is even more difficult for the local authority to both identify and monitor children where there are concerns about their welfare.

15. Homeless children aged 16 and 17 who need support and accommodation do not consistently get the help they urgently need. This means that some of the children who find themselves homeless in Swindon are left to find their own accommodation. The effectiveness of support to these children is further hampered by a lack of access to independent advocates.
16. Children whose level of need or risk is such that they may need to come into care to keep them safe are, in many cases, enabled to remain safely at home because of the effective work of the edge of care service. Throughout the work of the service, the views of children, parents and wider family members are gathered, and all are involved in planning the support provided.
17. Allegations against professionals who work with children are well managed, in a timely and robust way. Whenever necessary, appropriate action is taken to ensure children's safety.

The experiences and progress of children in care: inadequate

18. Children in care experience an inconsistent social work response. Although many children live in homes that are safe and meet their needs, this is not always the case. A significant minority of children live in homes that have not been matched to their needs and are a long way from their community, school and family. Some children do not benefit from living in a permanent home, and those who do are not always given the reassurance of knowing that this is their permanent home. Due to a high turnover of social workers, many children do not have the opportunity to build a relationship of trust with a single consistent social worker.
19. For most children, their care plans cover basic issues to do with their health, education, time with family and friends and other living arrangements. Children's wishes and feelings are also generally well recorded. However, not all care plans are clear as to how children's needs will be met in the local authority's care. Some are not completed quickly enough when children come into care and most lack contingency planning.
20. The independent reviewing officer (IRO) service has not been effective in challenging the local authority about the quality and timeliness of children's plans. Although this is beginning to improve, the effectiveness of these challenges is variable and for some children, plans continue to drift. Children's reviews are mainly timely and IROs meet with children prior to their reviews, to ensure that their wishes are presented at the meeting and included in planning.
21. Most children experience several changes of social worker, due to the high turnover of staff. This often has a negative impact on how effectively children's plans are progressed and on the ability of children and social workers to

establish positive relationships. Although most children are visited within statutory timescales, the frequency of visits is not always increased to match children's needs, for example, when they are in crisis, or when social workers need to gain a better understanding of children's views.

22. The quality and effectiveness of direct work is variable. When life-story work is undertaken by dedicated life-story workers, work is often of a higher standard, enabling children to develop a sensitive and detailed understanding of their histories. However, when children are not visited sufficiently frequently or the consistency of work is limited due to changes of social worker, the impact of this work can be undermined.
23. Most children's physical health needs are met appropriately. Despite this, some older children who have moved from one home to another experience a delay in having their physical health needs assessed and met. When children are experiencing emerging mental health needs, there is also a significant delay in accessing specialist services, such as child and adolescent mental health services. The local authority has taken positive action to address this shortfall in health provision by commissioning its own mental health clinician. This has allowed some children to receive a more timely response.
24. Most children in care are making positive educational progress. They are supported well by the virtual school and have personal education plans that are targeted to meet their educational needs. For some children who have moved placements frequently, education planning does not always keep pace with their moves and many of these children experience disrupted education provision or do not have arrangements for education in place.
25. Most children in care take part in a wide range of leisure and social activities that support them well to develop their social confidence and widen their horizon and aspirations.
26. Permanence planning lacks rigour and there is insufficient consideration of the impact of drift and delay on children's need for a secure and loving home. The variability in practice means that too many children experience significant delay in knowing where their permanent childhood home will be. This is particularly due to a lack of management and leadership oversight. However, for the small number of children living in care on a voluntary basis, the level of management oversight has recently improved to ensure that children return home within a reasonable timescale.
27. When groups of brothers or sisters come into care at the same time, for most there is a lack of 'together and apart' assessment work to underpin local authority decision-making. This means that the local authority is not clear whether keeping siblings together is always in the children's best interests. When siblings cannot be placed together, social workers do arrange family time to help to maintain their relationships.

28. Too many children in care are living at a distance from their home and family members. This makes it harder for them to maintain these important relationships and is often disruptive for their education. For older children with more complex needs, there is a lack of placement choice. This leads to decisions about where these children will live being based on availability rather than need. Some children live in unregistered children's homes due to a lack of alternatives. Social workers do not visit these children often enough to ensure that their needs are being met. These arrangements are not always recognised as unregistered by the local authority. This means the level of oversight and scrutiny by the local authority does not always adequately ensure children's well-being or safety.
29. Children placed within the local authority area are placed with foster carers who are assessed and trained well to meet children's needs. The foster carers are strongly supported by the fostering social worker team. However, repeated changes in children's social workers impacts on foster carers' ability to offer good-quality care to all children. This is also affected by social workers not always ensuring that foster carers have basic information about children, and a lack of progress in planning for children.
30. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are appropriately brought into care, but the matching of need to placement is not clear for most. Most are offered interpreters when this is needed. These children are well supported with their educational needs and are quickly given additional English tuition by the virtual school.
31. Children who are placed for adoption live with adoptive families who meet their needs. There is positive recruitment of adopters for children in Swindon, including for older children and those with additional needs. However, for some children, there are delays in being placed with their adoptive parents due to a lack of understanding in the social care workforce about early permanence planning. The quality of support to children placed with adoptive families is variable. Some children are visited regularly by their social workers and adoptive parents are enabled to access support services for their children. However, other children experience too many changes in social worker and there is a lack of proactive support.

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

32. Most care-experienced young people benefit from having social workers and pathway advisers (PAs) who establish positive relationships with them and are effective in making a positive difference for them. Pathway plans are typically written with young people, with most being sufficiently detailed and covering the key areas in young people's lives. However, plans are not usually updated quickly enough when young people's circumstances significantly change and,

therefore, support is not always well tailored to their needs at these important points in their lives.

33. Most care-experienced young people have their physical health needs met and are also provided with appropriate support for their emotional health and well-being. For some young people experiencing poor mental health, joint health and local authority planning is not sufficiently joined up to ensure that all their needs are met. This leaves some young people, including some at risk from self-harm, without the depth of support that their needs warrant.
34. The local offer for Swindon's care-experienced young people is publicised on various media platforms to seek to make young people aware of the offer. However, PAs are not proactive in ensuring that all young people know about their entitlements, leaving some unaware. While internet and laptop provision are offered to young people, for a few, there were delays in these being made available.
35. Although most care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation, for some there is a delay in identifying appropriate accommodation, which leaves them worried. Some live in unsuitable accommodation. For these young people, there is a lack of a meaningful assessment to understand risk and a lack of responsive visiting to ensure they are well supported.
36. Care-experienced young people leaving custody benefit from well-planned transitions. This ensures that appropriate accommodation and support are in place on their release.
37. Most care-experienced young people who are parents receive effective and joined-up support from health professionals and their PAs. However, a minority are still left in vulnerable circumstances, despite the support, increasing the difficulties they face parenting their child.
38. Many young people who are reaching the age for independence are well supported in education. The local authority helps young people carefully to transition from school to college. However, for those over 18 or with more complex needs, local authority support is not clear or robust enough to help them get back into education or move into employment.

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

39. Since the last ILACS inspection in 2019, the service provided by Swindon Borough Council to children has deteriorated. There has been a lack of sufficient oversight, support and challenge at all levels of the local authority, from frontline managers through to senior and corporate managers and political leaders. This has meant that too many children have been left with unassessed risks and needs, and plans that drift. When they have needed to

come into care, this has not always happened as quickly as it needed to and they have not always been matched with an appropriate carers who can meet their needs. For too many children, there has been delay in them being matched with a permanent home.

40. Children in Swindon experience too many changes of social worker. The local authority does not have a sufficiently stable workforce. Vacancies, a reliance on temporary staff and a high turnover of staff have led to high caseloads for some social workers. This also makes it more difficult for children to establish positive relationships with their social workers and has contributed to some children's plans drifting. There have been attempts to address this, through the creation of a learning framework for social workers in their first year of practice, training for managers and a focus on the establishment of a social work academy. These measures are all new and not fully embedded. Consequently, they have not had the impact on practice that the local authority aspires to.
41. Additional consequences of the high turnover of staff are that the local authority has not been able to establish a culture in which all staff are clear about what is expected of them or to embed the preferred model of social work practice. There are pockets in children's services, notably in the children with disability team and edge of care service, where children are receiving a strong service. However, this has not been replicated across all of children's services. For most children, the help, support and care from Swindon Borough Council are not currently good enough.
42. The needs of vulnerable children have not been at the centre of corporate planning in Swindon. There has been a lack of an overarching strategy across the council to secure a sufficient number and range of foster homes, children's homes and other placements to meet children's needs. As a corporate parent, and against the backdrop of significant national challenges in the sufficiency of good-quality placements for children, the local authority has not had a sufficient focus on securing permanence in well-matched homes for vulnerable children in Swindon.
43. The ability of the local authority to understand the profile of need and risk for children in Swindon, to understand how well it meets that need, and to shape, implement and monitor service improvement is undermined by the poor quality of management information. This is caused and compounded by difficulties with the electronic case recording system. It is difficult to input information, to navigate and to gain a clear overview of the interventions into children's lives. Some of the deficiencies in the local authority's management data are mitigated to an extent by the quality assurance in place. This is beginning to be able to support the ability of children's services to drive improvement.

44. The local authority has not developed sufficiently strong working relationships with partner agencies in all areas to create a coherent approach to meeting all the needs of the children for whom it has a statutory responsibility. There is a fragmented approach which has led to some needs, in particular the mental health and well-being needs of children, not being prioritised as effectively as they could be.
45. The very recent appointment of a new corporate director for children's services has been a catalyst for a more rigorous and realistic appraisal by the local authority of the quality and effectiveness of services to Swindon's children and families. Although this inspection did highlight some areas for improvement of which the local authority was not fully aware, there is now a clearer understanding of both those areas of stronger practice and those areas that are not currently delivering well enough or consistently enough for Swindon's children. While some actions taken as a result, such as work to strengthen the oversight of pre-proceedings work or the creation of an additional child in need team, have begun to have an impact, most actions taken to drive improvement are either very recent or still at a planning stage, and so their impact is necessarily very limited. Such actions appropriately include decisions to bring social work pay and foster carer allowances up to the same level as most other local authorities in the South West. And a review of the local authority's sufficiency strategy has concluded that a new strategy, better rooted in an analysis of the current and likely future profile of need, should be developed. These two developments indicate the commitment that corporate and political leaders have made to supporting progress.
46. The participation groups involving children, young people and parents are beginning to impact on the shaping and delivering of children's services in Swindon. Children in care and care-experienced young people are increasingly positively involved in influencing service development, through groups such as the voice and influence panel and the 'Raise Your Voice' Children in Care Council. They have been involved in recruitment and training of staff at all levels in children's services, scrutinising officer reports for the corporate parenting board and designing documentation across children's services to be more child-focused.
47. The local authority's approach to corporate parenting is under-developed. The corporate parenting board has not, until recently, challenged senior managers on the level and quality of service to children in care. Equally, the IRO service has not been effective enough in challenging the local authority when children are experiencing drift or delay with their plans. The IRO service is beginning to develop its role to ensure that vulnerable children in Swindon receive a good-quality service. These changes are relatively recent and their impact is therefore relatively limited.

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