

Inspection of Salford local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 10 November 2023

Lead inspector: Kathryn Grindrod, His Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
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| 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 | Outstanding |
| Overall effectiveness | Good |

Since the last inspection in 2018, Salford City Council children's services has continued to provide good-quality services to children. A strong senior leadership team ensures that there is a relentless focus on further improvement, with children at the centre of service delivery. Early help services provide an effective and timely response to children and families. When children need help or protection, this is quickly recognised and responded to at an appropriate level. Children in care have their needs met well and most live in stable, nurturing homes. Care leavers receive a caring, protective and ambitious response from skilled and dedicated workers, who make a positive difference to their lives.

Corporate and political leaders listen carefully to children, care leavers and staff and use this learning to inform strategic planning and financial investment. Robust quality assurance and governance arrangements are well established, and this means that leaders and managers know themselves well, are clearly sighted on the key areas for development, and usually take prompt action to address any shortfalls in practice.

The multi-agency partnership in Salford is strong and effective. There is a willingness across partner agencies to deliver the best services and outcomes for children, which leads to effective joint working and appropriate challenge to further improve services.

What needs to improve?

- Management oversight of pre-proceedings work to prevent unnecessary delays for children.

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

1. Children and families receive effective and timely support from a wide range of early help services. Early help assessments are detailed and thorough, and result in plans that build on families' strengths. This means that they have a positive impact for children. The interface between early help and children's social care is clear, which means that children and their families move between levels of support in line with their changing needs.
2. Partner agencies understand the thresholds for social care intervention and they contact the Bridge Partnership, the local authority's 'front door' team, when it is necessary to safeguard children. Information contained in contacts is usually sufficient to allow for prompt initial decision-making.
3. The Bridge Partnership is a strong service where co-located partners continue to work together effectively to determine appropriate responses for children. Multi-agency screening in the Bridge Partnership is proportionate and timely, historical concerns are well considered, and parental consent to screening is clearly sought, or dispensed with, when needed. Thorough and regular management oversight in the Bridge Partnership ensures that thresholds are correctly applied. Prompt transfer of cases to the duty team ensures that children receive the help and protection they need in timescales that meet their needs.
4. The response to concerns about children outside normal working hours is mostly robust and appropriate. When children are at immediate risk of harm, strategy discussions quickly take place and appropriate actions are taken. Communication between out-of-hours and daytime services ensures no delay in further appropriate support being offered.
5. When children are thought to be at risk of significant harm, strategy discussions and child protection enquiries are thorough and prompt. Partner agencies make meaningful contributions to decision-making and agreed actions reduce the risk of harm to children. Children are seen and spoken to promptly during enquiries. Safety planning is usually agreed with families and plans address identified risks appropriately. Safety plans could be further strengthened by including more detailed expectations of adults should specific situations arise.
6. Assessments are detailed and timely and consider the impact of family history on children. Children's individual needs are carefully considered and inform child-in-need or child protection plans, which are focused on actions to improve children's experiences. Help given to families is proportionate, although the lack

of clear timescales in some plans means that delays are not always challenged quickly enough for a small number of children.

7. Child-in-need and child protection plans are thoroughly reviewed at regular intervals and contingency plans are clear. Meetings to review plans are well attended by key professionals, family members and children when appropriate. Child protection chairs meet with children before and after review meetings when it is appropriate to do so, to ensure that they understand the process and that their wishes are understood.
8. Extended family members are routinely involved in support plans at an early stage to build resilience in families. The progress of plans is clearly measured by the difference they make to children's experiences, and most planning reduces risk to children effectively.
9. Most children have stable and meaningful relationships with their social workers. Regular, purposeful visits and thoughtful direct work with children mean that their wishes and feelings are known and acted on. Disabled children's needs are well understood and met by skilled and tenacious workers who are able to communicate with them effectively. Workers are knowledgeable about local resources and use this knowledge to develop bespoke and detailed plans for disabled children.
10. Decisions to start pre-proceedings are made when risks to children do not reduce in timescales that meet their needs. Letters to parents during pre-proceedings are not always clear enough about what has happened and what needs to change. Effective work with families during pre-proceedings means that some children are diverted from care proceedings safely. A small number of children experience delay while they are subject to pre-proceedings work, meaning that they experience the cumulative impact of parental issues for too long.
11. Children and families benefit from a comprehensive offer of support where there has been domestic abuse. Purposeful work is undertaken with victims, perpetrators and children as social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse and provide appropriate therapeutic support. There has been a refreshed focus on neglect and social workers routinely identify it appropriately, understand the impact on children's experiences and develop plans that focus on what needs to change. A range of tools and risk assessments support practice, although there is more to do to ensure that these are fully embedded and used across the workforce.
12. When children go missing, a thorough multi-agency process ensures that the response to incidents is timely and purposeful. A dedicated team gathers intelligence, and disruption and diversionary work identifies actions to reduce risk. Return home interviews explore risks and push-and-pull factors for children. This leads to a better understanding of children and a more targeted and effective response to reduce risks to them.

13. Children at risk of exploitation are identified and responded to effectively. Where there are risks to children linked to threats to life, a dedicated worker informs multi-agency planning, which ensures that risks are quickly recognised and that effective safety plans are put in place.
14. Allegations against professionals are managed swiftly and robustly. There is a determined focus on the safety and well-being of children, including understanding the views of the child through well-managed, multi-agency allegation meetings. This protects children from potential harm.
15. Electively home educated children are monitored to ensure that any vulnerable children are safe and educated at home. Detailed oversight and tracking of children missing from education ensure a well-coordinated response to address any concerns about their welfare.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

16. A strong and effective service, Route 29, supports many children to continue living at home with their families when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so. This co-designed service provides intensive interventions informed by a clear understanding of children's needs. Multi-agency formulation meetings carefully plan and review the effectiveness of this work based on how children's experiences and progress improve. For many children, this allows them to continue living at home with their families in improved situations.
17. When children do need to come into care, the majority of children do so in a timely manner. This is particularly true when there are immediate risks of harm to children.
18. Children's care plans are comprehensive and address their needs. For a small number of children, care plans do not have agreed timescales. Strong social work practice ensures that this does not negatively impact on planning for the majority of children, although a small number of children could have care orders discharged sooner. Reviews of plans are thoroughly overseen by independent reviewing officers, who take time to know and understand children well. They are mostly effective in challenging any drift in planning for children.
19. Robust planning supports the successful reunification home for children when it is safe to do so. Timely applications to discharge care orders mean that most children are not subject to legal orders for any longer than is necessary.
20. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from thorough assessments that sensitively consider the trauma they have experienced, as well as their cultural and linguistic needs. This leads to effective planning that meets their needs well.
21. The vast majority of children in care are visited by social workers regularly. These visits are purposeful and child-focused. Social workers build positive

relationships with children in care and their families and carers, which ensures that children have their wishes and feelings heard.

22. Detailed life-story work is carried out with most children in care, which helps them to understand their experiences. Comprehensive later-life letters are well written and are likely to be helpful to care-experienced adults wanting to understand their childhood experiences.
23. Risks to children in care related to exploitation and being missing from home are quickly recognised. Accurate and timely risk assessments lead to effective intervention and support. Appropriate use is made of the National Referral Mechanism to avoid children being criminalised when they have experienced exploitation. Appropriate applications to the family court to authorise deprivation of liberty orders under inherent jurisdiction ensure that children can be safeguarded when they have complex safeguarding needs.
24. Children in care have their health needs met promptly, as there are no delays in providing appropriate support. Health assessments and dental checks are mostly completed within statutory timescales and any identified needs are met through a range of targeted services. Salford CAMHS for Cared for Children (Starlac) provides prompt mental health and emotional well-being services, and the Emerge service ensures that 16- and 17-year-old children who experience moderate to severe mental health problems receive high-quality support when it is needed.
25. Social workers are ambitious for children in care. They establish children's strengths and aspirations and help children to make progress at their own pace. Children's achievements and successes are celebrated. Children in care are encouraged to engage in hobbies and activities that increase their confidence and help them to develop new skills.
26. Virtual school leaders are passionate about and ambitious for children in care. Personal education plans (PEPs) are of good quality, aspirational and completed in a timely manner for younger children. There are sometimes delays in completing written PEPs for 16- and 17-year-old children, but this does not impact on the quality and timeliness of the educational support they receive.
27. A small number of children in care live in unregistered children's homes for short periods of time. There is regular senior management and social work oversight of these arrangements. This mitigates the risks for these children.
28. Most children in care live in stable homes within the local authority area. Significant investment in the fostering service means that most children in care live with foster carers or kinship carers. Effective assessment and training of foster carers mean that children receive high-quality care.
29. Foster carers are positive about the support they receive from social workers and other services. The provision of services providing effective wraparound

and specialist therapeutic support, such as Route 29 and Starlac, has led to a reduction in placement disruptions for children.

30. Permanence is considered at the earliest opportunity for most children in care. Children live with their brothers and sisters when it is appropriate for them to do so. The majority of children do not experience delay in living with their permanent carers, although a small number of applications for special guardianship orders or long-term fostering matches could be tracked and progressed more efficiently.
31. Adoption work with children is strong. Effective working and communication with the regional adoption agency (Adoption Counts) mean that adoption plans progress at a pace that is right for children.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

32. Workers and managers in the care leavers service Next Step are strong advocates for their young people. Skilled and resourceful social workers in the service begin working with children at 16 years of age and continue to work with most of these young people until they no longer want a service, or they turn 25 years of age. This leads to trusting and enduring relationships that ensure that care leavers are guided through key transition points in their lives. This is greatly valued by care leavers.
33. Workers know their care leavers very well and act in their best interests when helping and supporting them. Support is individually tailored to ensure that it is offered in the most effective way for each care leaver and at the right time. Care leavers are encouraged to build lasting relationships with their families and friends.
34. All care leavers are in touch with the Next Step service. There is persistence and determination shown across the service to remain in touch with care leavers in a meaningful way. Workers are proactive in creating opportunities to engage with care leavers and offer resources such as laundry and cooking facilities to encourage care leavers to drop into the service. Other professionals, such as those from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and housing agencies, are regularly available for care leavers to drop in and seek advice from.
35. Workers clearly understand the offer for care leavers and practically and emotionally support them to access their entitlements. The service continues to build working relationships with many local businesses and organisations. This has led to an array of work experience, apprenticeships, mentoring and coaching opportunities, alongside additional free practical support for care leavers, such as providing furniture and household items. This support supplements the core offer, which includes payment of council tax and access to Wi-Fi. The online offer is not updated with sufficient regularity to reflect the comprehensive range of support and entitlements available for care leavers.

36. Pathway plans continue to be thorough and detailed, identifying specific support and actions that will help care leavers to achieve their ambitions and feel settled and happy. Young people's experiences clearly inform packages of support. Contingency planning is particularly strong, which ensures that planning for care leavers is not delayed or disrupted when circumstances change. The persistence and ambition shown by social workers help care leavers to achieve their long-term goals.
37. Since the focused visit in 2021, when pathway plans were felt by care leavers to be too long, care leavers have worked with the Next Step workers to develop a more accessible written pathway plan. This now sits alongside more detailed and lengthy plans, which ensures that written plans are more flexible and accessible to care leavers.
38. Dedicated reviewing officers provide independent oversight of care leavers' plans, which ensures that actions are completed within timescales and new recommendations identified. This additional level of scrutiny further strengthens the quality of planning for care leavers.
39. Care leavers are practically and emotionally supported to move towards living independently at a pace that is right for them. Social workers are proactive in ensuring that children with additional needs receive adult social care services when this is required. Care leavers are provided with the necessary documents they need as they move into adulthood.
40. Care leavers are strongly encouraged to have high aspirations. A dedicated community parenting officer supports workers and care leavers to ensure access to a wide variety of opportunities. Care leavers' plans for education, employment or training are divided into achievable targets, which are celebrated and reinforced. This builds care leavers' confidence and self-belief and has led to high numbers of care leavers being in the specific education, employment or training that they aspire to. Many care leavers have progressed to university and are well supported with all their needs during their studies.
41. Care leavers' wide-ranging health needs are supported by their social workers. Specialist nurses and therapists are regularly based at the Next Step office to offer a drop-in service. Services commissioned specifically for care leavers offer emotional support about a range of issues, and protocols with the Probation Service, DWP, Salford Youth Justice Service, Early Break and other agencies lead to effective joint planning for care leavers. This means that care leavers receive the right support when it is needed without delay.
42. There is a wide range of good-quality accommodation available for care leavers. The joint protocol with Housing Options is rigorously managed to ensure that care leavers' accommodation needs are met. A dedicated tenancy support worker helps care leavers with the practicalities of setting up home and supports them to manage their tenancies.

43. Social workers know and understand care leavers very well. This leads to an effective and proportionate response to any risks facing care leavers.
44. Efforts to engage and work with vulnerable care leavers who are parents are robust and persistent. They are supported to meet the needs of their children, while also planning for their own future work or education ambitions.
45. The traumas experienced by care leavers who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well understood, and appropriate emotional and practical support is offered to them. They are helped to find their families, if they wish to, and to access legal support to have their right to remain determined. These young people are making good progress and are well supported to meet their high aspirations, including to attend university.
46. Care leavers in custody benefit from consistently strong support from their social workers throughout their time in custody to make progress and to be prepared for life in the community on their release. Regular visits to these care leavers, along with detailed and specific planning, ensure that they have their health, education and safety needs met while in custody.
47. Care leavers over the age of 21 continue to receive a service until they are 25 should they wish to do so. Those over 25 are reminded that the post-25 offer means that there is an 'open door' for them should they need advice at any time in the future.

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

48. Children are at the heart of decision-making in Salford. Across the political and corporate landscape, there is an impressive level of commitment, drive and ambition to achieve the best outcomes for children.
49. The views of children and their families are routinely sought and acted on. Key political and corporate leaders regularly meet with and talk to children, young people and workers. This informs strategic planning and investment and leads to decisive strategic action to improve children's lives.
50. Senior leaders are generally well informed and knowledgeable about the strengths and challenges within services to children. Prompt action is taken in response to areas for further development, although robust senior management oversight of children who are subject to pre-proceedings work has only recently been implemented.
51. A recognition of local placement sufficiency challenges led to significant financial investment in the fostering and edge-of-care services (Route 29). This means that a higher-than-average number of children in care live within the local authority area. However, unregistered children's homes are still occasionally used for short periods due to a lack of immediate suitable provision

for a small number of older children with complex safeguarding needs. Management oversight of children in these placements is robust.

52. The multi-agency partnership is a strong and effective one. At a strategic level, there is a real commitment and willingness to learn, demonstrated through robust and effective quality assurance and governance arrangements. Regular multi-agency audits and deep dives of practice take place, and practitioners can clearly articulate how these positively impact on their practice. This includes routine multi-agency review of contacts and how they are managed in the Bridge Partnership. It also includes responding to emerging themes and data, such as analysing repeat child protection plans when numbers began to rise. An openness to learn across the partnership means that areas for development are usually quickly identified. Multi-agency working with children is very effective and leads to improvements in children's lives.
53. Performance management and monitoring processes are robust, ensuring that political and corporate leaders within the local authority and across the partnership are aware of current practice and any emerging issues for children and staff. These are responded to promptly and effectively.
54. Corporate parenting for looked after children and care leavers is very well developed. Care experience has been made a protected characteristic in the council. There is pride in children's achievements, which are celebrated in style. The Children in Care Council, Fight for Change, is impactful, contributing to training for carers and workers and changing the language used by practitioners and leaders. Corporate leaders recently invited an external peer review to assist in strengthening the sense of corporate responsibility across the whole council.
55. A largely accurate self-assessment and extensive quality assurance work drive improvements for most children. A comprehensive quality assurance framework is well supported by robust governance systems and close-the-loop activities completed across partner agencies and the local authority. Conversational audits, which involve workers and families, are routinely carried out. Alongside observations of practice, these activities provide valuable practice development opportunities for workers, which leads to sustained practice improvements.
56. Areas for development identified at previous inspections and focused visits have been addressed with the help of young people and parent reference groups.
57. Partners such as the family judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and schools, along with the independent scrutineer, are positive about the quality and impact of practice across the service. They speak highly of leaders within the council, describing them as responsive and accessible.
58. Manageable workloads across the service ensure that practitioners are able to build meaningful relationships with children and young people. This enables

effective work to be carried out with children and their families as outlined in the social work model of practice adopted by the council. This is helped by an increasing stability in the workforce.

59. Training for workers is described by practitioners as a 'massive strength'. A wide variety of good-quality training is available, and practitioners can clearly articulate the difference training makes to their practice and for children. This evidences a strong learning culture.
60. The supervision of social workers is mostly frequent and effective. While supervision actions do not always have agreed timescales, this rarely impacts on children as the quality of social work practice and management oversight is strong.
61. Practitioners thoroughly enjoy working in Salford and feel safe and supported. Many have worked for the local authority for several years and, more recently, agency workers are choosing to accept permanent contracts. Workers are encouraged to develop and progress in their careers, and many do.
62. Practitioners describe an air of calmness and inspiration from senior leaders. They feel that leaders 'get that it is a hard job', and they appreciate that this is recognised and rewarded.
63. Practitioners feel that children are at the heart of everything in Salford and that leaders want to do their best for children. This means a lot to them as workers and is a key reason they want to stay.

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