

# Inspection of Plymouth City Council local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 22 January to 2 February 2024

**Lead inspector:** Tracey Ledger, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children and their families do not receive consistently good services in Plymouth. Leaders have made improvements in some areas since the previous inspection, in 2018. Significantly, this includes the response to concerns about children by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), about which there were serious concerns at the last focused visit in December 2022. While improvements are starting to be seen in practice, the local authority recognises that much more is needed to raise standards so that all children benefit from consistently good support.

There has been significant instability in senior leadership since the last judgement inspection, most acutely last year. This has had an impact and has led to delays in improving services for the children and families of Plymouth. As a result, the quality of practice in some areas has suffered and progress has been somewhat intermittent and too slow.

Since August 2023, with the appointment of the current director of children's services, leadership has been more consistent and the drive to improve practice has been appropriately focused and purposeful. This is because leaders understand the strengths and weaknesses of their service and have a realistic plan in place to address the shortcomings. While not all appointments are permanent, the

appointment of the interim director of children's services to the permanent role has had a palpable impact, not only for the children and families of Plymouth, but also for the workforce. Significantly, as well as considering structural change and practice improvement, leaders have made a significant cultural shift.

### **What needs to improve?**

- The effectiveness of the response to worries and concerns for children out of office hours.
- The local authority designated officer (LADO)'s quality of practice and advice, oversight and recording of allegations.
- The effectiveness of some aspects of joint working across the council and with partner agencies, in particular housing, health, schools and education providers, and adult social care services.
- The quality and availability of accommodation for children and young people.
- The timeliness of health assessments for children in care.
- How well children and young people are supported to access appropriate education, training and employment.
- How effectively the local authority, schools and education providers work together to bring down the current high rate of children being excluded.
- The arrangements to plan for and support children to transition to adulthood, in particular those with additional needs.

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

1. When concerns are raised about children, professionally curious social workers in the MASH evaluate information well, and responses are mostly appropriate to the presenting issues. The need to gain consent from parents to complete further checks with other agencies is mostly understood and clearly recorded and, when dispensed with, this is appropriate. However, for a small number of children, such checks are completed without parental consent when this is not proportionate. Senior leaders are aware of this and are actively taking steps to change practice.
2. Most referrals from partner agencies are timely and thresholds for different levels of support and intervention are appropriately understood and applied. Referrals about children are progressed promptly and are appropriately risk assessed. Direction and oversight from advanced practitioners are generally consistent and effective, although work is under way to further strengthen the quality of management oversight and the recording of decision-making.
3. The introduction of a professional helpline in the MASH provides staff from partner agencies with access to prompt support and advice when they are worried about children and helps them to consider next steps. When thresholds

for statutory services have been met, the helpline supports timely responses to address risks for children. The positive impact of this consultation line can be seen in practice and partner agencies told inspectors that they value this service.

4. Helpful daily multi-agency intelligence meetings take place in the MASH. These meetings provide an opportunity for swift information-sharing and help professionals to map and understand local risks to children and to respond quickly and effectively. This includes considering children living in homes with domestic abuse and those who have gone missing.
5. The response to children who go missing and children at risk of extra-familial harm is coordinated effectively across the whole service and is helping to reduce harm. Persistent interventions from the specialist team for children who go missing, youth workers and the edge of care team are providing a strong and consistent response for children. Most children who go missing benefit from timely return home interviews that capture their experiences well. Information about wider harm relating to exploitation, gangs and substance misuse is well considered and updated through strong 'safer me' assessments. If children are missing for more than 24 hours, multi-agency child protection strategy meetings take place to ensure a joint response to help to find children and reduce risks for them.
6. When concerns are raised about domestic abuse, there is effective consideration of risks, history and safety planning for children. This has been strengthened by focused training being provided for managers in the MASH.
7. Early help services in Plymouth are not integrated effectively with children's social care. This means that not all children and their families benefit from seamless, timely and appropriate early help and support. When children are referred for a statutory service and it is assessed they would be better supported by early help, the lack of integration means that these children can wait too long for a service or not receive one at all. As a result, some children are re-referred for similar or the same issues. When children and families do access early help services, their needs are assessed and understood well, plans are strong and subsequent interventions support positive changes.
8. When concerns are raised about children out of office hours, the response is not always effective. At times, local authority staff and partners making referrals do not think enough about or fully evaluate the presenting information and therefore do not identify wider risks that might be present. Because of this, children have been left in situations in which their needs and risks have not been fully assessed or understood.
9. The LADO service is not effective. Records are poor and do not provide assurance that appropriate advice, action or safety planning has taken place. Not all allegations made against professionals are managed well or well recorded. At times, thresholds are not applied appropriately. This has resulted

- in poor advice and consultation, or formal meetings taking place that could have been avoided.
10. When children are at immediate risk of harm, action is taken to ensure that risks are assessed through timely child protection strategy meetings. In most circumstances, but not all, relevant partner agencies attend. The quality of most strategy meetings is strong and most lead to the right actions for children.
  11. Child protection investigations are timely and appropriate. For most children, this leads to a clear understanding of risk. For a minority of children, joint investigations are not always undertaken in accordance with statutory guidance. Investigations are not always progressed; this is partly because guidance is not followed as well as it should be. As a result, allegations made by children are not always investigated as well as they could be.
  12. Decisions about children being progressed to initial child protection conferences are appropriate. Although significant improvements in timeliness have been achieved over the last year, for about 10% of children, initial conferences do not happen in a timely way. This means that these children wait too long for a fully formulated multi-agency plan to address their needs and there is a delay in them receiving support services.
  13. The quality of social work assessments is inconsistent. Stronger assessments are comprehensive and demonstrate a thorough understanding of the child's world. They are timely and proportionate to risk. Children are seen frequently, and their views and experiences are reflected throughout these assessments. Strong assessments lead to impactful child in need and child protection plans that improve children's lives. A broadly similar proportion of assessments are poorer. In these weaker examples, assessments often take too long to complete and are not purposeful. They too often lack a thorough analysis of children's experiences, and this impedes timely and effective planning. For some children, this means a delay in the provision of support services. Not enough has been done to understand what life is like for these children. Weaker assessments often lead to repeated referrals, as things do not change for children.
  14. Most children's needs are reviewed through regular child in need and child protection meetings, which mostly consider need and risk well. For a small number of children, the development of plans is delayed. As a result, there is a delay in services and support being put in place for some children.
  15. The pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline process has been strengthened in the last six months. There is increased tracking and manager oversight for children, to prevent drift and delay. More recently, early and decisive decision-making to escalate to pre-proceedings is now helping to reduce delay and improve outcomes for children. It is positive that some children are not escalated to court proceedings because of timely specialist

assessment and support from the community-based assessment team that is enabling them to safely remain living with their families.

16. Most children who are at risk of coming into care receive intensive and creative support to help them remain with their families. Assessments are individualised and meaningful. The evaluation of strengths and risks is effective and is underpinned by the local authority's chosen restorative model of practice. Wider family members are appropriately involved in delivering support and this is planned and coordinated through family meetings and family group conferencing. Children benefit from frequent visits and workers are available at times of crisis.
17. Many social workers know their children well and build positive relationships with them. Most children are visited at a frequency that meets their needs and visits are increased when risks escalate. Some children benefit from thoughtful and carefully planned direct work that is making a difference to their lives.
18. Disabled children receive an inconsistent service. Some children are making progress because of the help and support they receive. For others, support is delayed and results in needs escalating.
19. Support to 16- and 17-year-olds who are at risk of becoming homeless or who are homeless is generally strong. The specialist team provides an effective and child-centred response, ensuring that children understand their rights and entitlements. Advocacy support is provided when needed. This means that children get help and support quickly when they find themselves in these circumstances.
20. Despite a robust multi-agency campaign to raise awareness of private fostering in Plymouth, recorded numbers of children in such arrangements remain low. Assessments are written to children and identify their needs, although delays in receiving checks and pertinent health information mean that assessments are sometimes signed off without full information. This means risks are not always properly assessed or understood before assessments and plans are agreed by managers.
21. Children who are young carers have their needs assessed sensitively and receive effective support. This helps them become involved in various activities outside of their homes. The majority of young carers access the Young Carers project and are exceptionally well supported. Children are supported to take time out of their family situations and mix with other children who are living with similar challenges. They take part in a wide range of activities and have fun in a supportive environment where staff understand the complexities of their situation and have a sound understanding of their additional needs.
22. The local authority has not acted quickly enough to work with education partners to ensure that children have access to the right education. Too many children are not attending school as much as they should. This is an additional

risk for vulnerable children. Suspensions and exclusions, part-time timetables and rates of severe absence are all far too high. Increasing numbers of parents opt for home education, even when this is not necessarily the right choice for their children. This is particularly the case for children with additional needs. Oversight of this cohort of children is beginning to improve and work is under way to strengthen how services work more effectively together to monitor and promote the welfare of these children. The local authority recognises the importance of this issue and is now affording it appropriate priority. This work is overdue and the lack of consistently good enough joint working between many schools and the local authority has made this a real challenge, although joint working with schools is now strengthening.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care: requires improvement to be good**

23. For most children, decision-making for them to come into care is appropriate and in their best interests, but for some, the decision to bring them into care has not been made in a timely manner. As a result, too many children enter care in an unplanned way or in response to a crisis.
24. Children in care are supported well to maintain safe and meaningful contact with family and friends. When it is safe and appropriate for children to return to their parents or extended family, this is achieved well. Most children who have returned to their parents after a short period of being a child in care do so in a planned way and the majority then remain at home. Risks are understood well and, when it is necessary, risks are managed appropriately within care proceedings.
25. A small number of older children have returned to live with their parents in an unplanned way, due to changing needs. For the majority of these children, their engagement in education is weak and their relationships with their social workers are not strong, often due to repeat changes of worker. Much of this is rooted in the legacy of past weaker social work involvement and placement sufficiency challenges.
26. When family members come forward as potential kinship carers, social workers help them to understand what is required, the assessment process and what will be expected of them if they become the child's formal carer. Assessments are timely and thorough, and fully consider their ability to support the child's needs. Kinship carers receive ongoing support from specialist workers, which continues to be made available to them even when children leave care and remain with their carers under a special guardianship order.
27. Most children in care receive visits from their social workers in line with their needs, with visits increasing when children's needs or situations change. This includes for children with additional needs and those placed out of the local authority area. Most children benefit from meaningful relationships with their social workers.

28. These relationships support sensitive and creative direct work to be completed with many children. However, some children still experience too many changes of social worker, which impacts negatively on their ability to build a relationship of trust with a consistent social worker.
29. Life-story work is not consistently carried out with all children who could benefit from this work. When life-story work is undertaken, it is more usually for children with a plan for adoption. These children have creative and informative story books and an electronic copy is kept in case children misplace their copy. This will help them to understand their journey into and through care and why the decisions that were made for them were made.
30. Assessments are increasingly written to children and capture children's histories, their wishes and feelings and the views of significant family members and professionals who know them well. Children are increasingly being consulted to seek their views, which are then used to inform their plans. However, when plans are updated, they are not routinely shared with children. This is a missed opportunity to ensure that children feel listened to and to help them continue to be involved in the work and planning for them.
31. Permanence for children is not always considered as early as it could be. For a small number of children in long-term fostering arrangements, the matching of these placements is not quick enough. As a result, too many children remain living in temporary arrangements for too long, without having the certainty that comes from knowing who will care for them for the rest of their childhood. When permanence is achieved for children, this is celebrated well.
32. Beyond the issue of permanence, care planning for children is mostly limited to the here and now and immediate tasks that need to be completed. Plans are not always implemented swiftly or reviewed regularly. This too often leads to the same actions being repeated and delays for some children in receiving the services they require. Independent reviewing officers oversee the quality of children's care and check children's plans and record what else needs to be done. However, this oversight is not routinely translating into necessary changes in practice around the content or pace of children's plans.
33. Children and young people have access to, and benefit from, strong and effective independent advocacy services. This includes support for groups of children and young people, such as the 'young safeguarders group'. Participation workers advocate relentlessly for these children and ensure that children's voices are heard and action is taken. Children and young people are helping to shape future practice and hold senior leaders and politicians to account. On an individual level, advocates support children and young people to understand why important decisions are made and help them to have their wishes and views heard.
34. Children who are looked after in Plymouth are not all getting their health needs assessed in a timely way. Almost half do not receive their initial health

assessment within the expected time frame. This means that their immediate health needs are not always fully recognised and responded to. Children are not always referred to health services at the earliest opportunity and health partners do not respond in a consistently timely way. Health support is stronger for children who have been in care for longer than a year; however, this is still not as consistently strong as it should be.

35. Not all children are getting access to dental care as they should be. Only half of children have had an up-to-date check-up. At times, the local authority funds private dental care. However, this is in response to children being in pain and not about planned and preventative dental care.
36. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children do not currently benefit quickly enough from access to the services and support they require. For example, links between the local authority and appropriate legal advisers are underdeveloped. This creates a delay and additional worry for some young people who need reassurance and guidance about their legal status. Recent changes to practice ensure that children and young people are now immediately allocated to social workers who have an increasingly improving understanding of their needs. This avoids several changes in worker and, consequently, they receive the support they require from a worker who will remain involved with them.
37. Robust arrangements are in place to reduce the number of children who live in unregistered children's homes and to mitigate the risk from living in such homes. This includes oversight by senior leaders and independent reviewing officers. The local authority is working creatively with a national provider to secure registered placement opportunities; however, too many children remain living in such arrangements.
38. The fostering service has started to make well-considered improvements. Their aspirations are underpinned by significant support and investment. Foster carers report that they are feeling heard following foster carer forums and are feeling more valued as professionals. There is an ambitious vision for the service and planned improvements, such as the 'mockingbird' model and plans to join a fostering hub to aid recruitment, are moving ahead at pace. However, there is a current shortage of foster carers. This has meant that, at times, children have been inappropriately placed with foster carers who have not been approved to meet their needs. This leads to disruption in some children's placements.
39. The arrangements in place with a regional adoption agency are working well and are effective. There is clear management grip and strong oversight of the quality of the adoption services being provided. There is a positive working relationship, with clear lines of oversight by the local authority. This means that there are sufficient and suitable adopters to meet the needs of Plymouth children and to target recruitment of adopters effectively for children with complex needs or for larger sibling groups.



40. Some children's journeys into supported accommodation are because of placement breakdowns and a lack of suitable foster homes rather than being a positive choice. Some of these children are at high risk, including risks from exploitation and going missing. The success of these placements is mixed. For some children and young people, episodes of going missing have reduced or stopped all together, risks have reduced and they are settled in their accommodation. For others, concerns about going missing and their vulnerability to exploitation continue.
41. There are still too many older children in care who are not in full-time education. For some of these children, appropriate education has not been in place for far too long. Although the virtual school is determined to improve this situation, and its impact is strengthening, this means that currently, some children are still missing out on education, training or employment.
42. The headteacher of the virtual school recognises these challenges and is ambitious for this to improve. Local authority leaders have embarked on a journey to help improve how schools, carers and professionals work together to benefit children's education. Central to this work is raising aspirations for children in care so that increasing numbers successfully go on to education, employment or training once they leave school. Work to improve the quality, timeliness, usefulness and impact of children's personal education plans is under way, but there is more to do. Currently, most children attend school regularly and achieve well, but too many others do not.

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

43. Care-experienced young people mostly benefit from personal advisers (PAs) who know them well and with whom they have positive and trusting relationships. PAs are relentless in helping them emotionally and practically at times of crisis.
44. Children benefit from PAs being allocated to them at 16. This means PAs can work alongside children's social workers and better help children prepare for and move to adulthood. Care-experienced young people are supported to meet their physical and emotional health needs by their PAs but this support is not always timely or of the highest standard. Some have access to health advice from dedicated nurses who go the extra mile to support their health needs. Once children reach 18, arrangements for specialist health support are not as strong. Not all have access to adult social care services when they need it and accessing mental health services can be challenging. This leaves some young people without the support they need.
45. Care-experienced young people benefit from a strong and well-thought-out offer of support and have a good awareness of their entitlements. The care leaver offer has recently been updated and young people were included to good effect in the development of this. This collaboration helps them feel

valued and listened to. A particular strength is that care-experienced young people's council tax is paid, regardless of where they live, whether in Plymouth or beyond. They also have free access to local gyms, not only for themselves but also for a friend.

46. Pathway planning for and with care-experienced young people is underdeveloped. Plans are not always clear enough and this makes it harder for young people to understand them. Care-experienced young people do have pathway plans, but these are not always updated within the required timescales or when young people's situations change. Pathway plans are co-produced with young people, but the quality of these is variable and so they are not always as effective as they could be. Stronger plans demonstrate aspirations for young people. Despite these weaknesses, some care-experienced young people's outcomes far exceed their expectations, a testament to the efforts of these young people and the tenacity of PAs.
47. PAs demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding risks for care-experienced young people and act effectively to reduce risk and educate young people about the risks they are facing.
48. Too many care leavers are not in education, employment or training. There are plans to tackle this but planning is still at a relatively early stage and so its impact is inevitably limited at present.
49. Not all care-experienced young people are living in accommodation that matches their needs. The local authority has started to address the problem of a lack of sufficient volume and range of suitable accommodation options by working creatively alongside independent providers. However, more needs to be done with housing and other partners to overcome these challenges.
50. The lack of sufficient housing options and delays in planning ahead mean that a very small number of care-experienced young people are being moved into bed and breakfast accommodation, before going on to more suitable living arrangements. Most care-experienced young people move on from these arrangements quickly. This heightens their vulnerability and contributes to anxiety and uncertainty.
51. Many care-experienced young people live in semi-supported or supported accommodation. There are robust systems in place to oversee these arrangements and to continue to improve the quality of the provision. The local authority has provided financial support directly to supported accommodation providers to support them with the new process of registering with Ofsted.
52. The local authority has provided high-quality supported accommodation to a small number of care-experienced young people. The Merrivale development is a great step forward and provides well-equipped, comfortable housing for 12 young people, with overnight staffing. This is making a positive difference but is a temporary offer and young people have to move to permanent

accommodation within 12 months. For young people who want to get into employment, the benefit system places them at a disadvantage and their rent increases to the point where they cannot afford to go to work. The local authority has recognised this and taken swift action to resolve this.

53. Care-experienced young people are consulted and included in designing the services they receive. Groups for care-experienced young people meet regularly with participation workers who seek their views and comments and young people then feed these back directly to the Corporate Parenting Board. These views are taken seriously and are making a positive difference, for example, in the co-production of the care leaver offer. Young people are involved in recruitment and their views and thoughts are genuinely considered when decisions are made.
54. Care leavers who are parents are well supported by their PAs. When there is children's services involvement with their children, PAs will advocate on behalf of, and support, care leavers in understanding the process and helping them to engage with other professionals. PAs have an effective understanding of safeguarding and the need to ensure that the children of care leavers are safe and protected.
55. Support for young people who are care experienced and are in or have been in custody is inconsistent. For example, some are visited on a regular basis and their needs both in custody and on release are discussed and planned for. Others do not get any visits. As a result, plans about release are not always coordinated well to ensure that support services and appropriate housing are in place, which creates uncertainty for young people.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good**

56. The leadership team of the council recognises and understands what needs to happen to ensure that services for children improve. There is a shared understanding and commitment to continue to implement a realistic three-year improvement plan. This is reflected in corporate decision-making, actions and active attendance at key committees and boards. The political and financial commitments in place have started to have a positive impact and provide a solid foundation that is a necessary pre-condition to support further progress.
57. Since the last inspection in 2018, leaders have strengthened relationships with partner agencies. Most agencies are working more collaboratively and effectively at a strategic level and can challenge each other to ensure that both the local authority and partner agencies are working together and taking shared responsibility for the children of Plymouth. While these inter-agency relationships are becoming more mature, there is more work to do here. This includes ensuring that joint work is underpinned by more shared governance arrangements, policies and priorities that are jointly owned, and that services are delivered within these parameters. The lack of a representative from the

armed forces in the local safeguarding partnership arrangements is a gap that limits leaders' ability to fully understand and meet the needs of military children and families.

58. Leaders have provided staff from partner agencies with effective and appropriate safeguarding training and access to advice and support, which they appreciate and cite as a positive improvement. Training has helped them to better understand thresholds, which is helping to ensure that referrals to the MASH are more appropriate. As result, some areas of practice have improved and there is a more shared understanding and sense of responsibility in respect of next steps. Strengthened system leadership is ensuring that partners are progressively better engaged, but this remains a work in progress. More needs to be done, for example with housing organisations, to help improve care-experienced young people's access to housing options that more consistently meet their needs.
59. While there is a plan to deliver early help through family hubs, at present, early help services are neither a cohesive offer nor well integrated with statutory services. Steps were taken during the inspection to strengthen this but the pace of change for redesigning services has been slow. The pace and effectiveness of service improvement have accelerated in the last six months. The focus during this time has been on ensuring that the needs of, and risks to, children receiving statutory services are better understood and that they are kept safe.
60. As corporate parents, leaders have strengthened their commitment to and delivery for children in care in Plymouth. As a result of increasing the number of social workers and the stability of the workforce, children are starting to benefit from more stable relationships with their social workers. Social workers know the children well and at a strategic level there has been increased engagement with and learning from children. Ensuring that there is a sufficient range and number of foster placement and other accommodation options for children remains a significant challenge. Leaders recognise the challenge and their plans are credible and realistic but significant delivery is yet to follow.
61. The local authority has an outward-looking culture and leaders continue to seek advice and support from a range of sources to help drive service improvement. This approach is supporting the successful implementation of an improvement plan. The local authority is working well with other local authorities and the impact of this work is notable through the improvement board, which is chaired by an experienced external director of children's services. These arrangements are providing appropriate challenge but also recognise the progress made. There is more to do to ensure that improvements are firmly embedded in practice.
62. The strengthening of quality assurance is helping leaders to better understand the quality of practice and the impact for children in Plymouth. For most areas of practice, there is appropriate senior leadership oversight. Leaders have provided staff and managers with clear practice expectations, and they are

modelling professional expectations. There is more work to do to ensure that practice expectations are fully understood and embedded. For example, the wider management team has yet to ensure that they consistently demonstrate the recording of the rationale for decisions about children in their electronic case records. Not all learning activity, including audit activity and supervision for staff, is currently being used as well as it could be to drive improvements in practice, either with individual children or at a strategic level.

63. Leaders have taken effective action to stabilise and increase the workforce. This is making a positive difference. Staff are supported well by the social work academy, which provides appropriate training for the whole workforce. In particular, the work carried out with newly qualified social workers and social workers who have been recruited from abroad is helping improve services for children and young people. In addition, leaders have ensured that these staff have protected workloads and increased supervision, which they told inspectors that they appreciate. Leaders are moving forward with plans to further strengthen their approach to ensuring that they have a suitably experienced and skilled workforce, including through working in partnership with local universities to develop social work apprenticeships.

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