

# Inspection of Hampshire local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 10 to 14 June 2024

**Lead inspector:** Kendra Bell, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in Hampshire continue to benefit from strong and effective services that make a positive difference to their lives. Since the previous inspection in 2019, when services were judged to be outstanding, the quality and impact of services have been maintained and, in some areas, further strengthened and enhanced. Based on an accurate self-evaluation of services, senior leaders have retained their absolute focus on the progress and experiences of children, while successfully delivering whole-scale culture change and service transformation. A new operational model of family help, that brings early help together with statutory children's services, has been implemented and is already making a clear difference to children's experiences. Children in care benefit from consistently good and nurturing care and most live in stable homes. Care leavers benefit from good and improving services which help to enhance their lives as independent young adults.

Political, corporate and children's services senior leaders have worked exceptionally well together to respond to the challenges brought by the increase in the level and complexity of need for children, staff turnover and placement sufficiency. The significant investment in children's services, in new and existing services, and in growing the workforce has enabled performance to remain strong.

## What needs to improve?

- The take-up and quality of return conversations with children who go missing from home and care.
- The quality of practice and senior management oversight of children living in private fostering arrangements.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding

1. Children receive a timely and effective response from skilled and knowledgeable workers in the children's resource team (CRT) and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Initial information about children is carefully analysed and workers prioritise children who need urgent protection. Workers understand the need to work alongside families and parental consent is mostly well considered and explicitly recorded. When appropriate, children are transferred to MASH social workers who quickly gather a range of information to help inform their analysis of children's needs. Their findings are well considered and lead to evidence-based recommendations for next steps. Management oversight at key decision points is comprehensive and timely. Children are quickly transferred to children's social care or are appropriately signposted to universal services to help them to access the support that they need.
2. Children and families receive the same high quality of response if concerns are raised outside of normal office hours. Timely action is taken to safeguard children and there is good information-sharing between day services and out-of-hours social workers.
3. The response to allegations against professionals is thorough and timely. Multi-agency meetings consider all known information about the individuals concerned and appropriate action is taken to safeguard children.
4. The majority of child and family assessments, including those for unborn children and disabled children, are timely, comprehensive and of good quality. Social workers focus on listening to children and understanding the impact of their experiences. Children's voices are captured consistently well, and assessments are written to children, using very sensitive and thoughtful language. The views of absent parents and other family members are routinely sought to provide a fuller understanding of the family situation. Most assessments lead to coherent plans which prioritise the most important actions that will help to improve children's experiences. A small number of assessments are too optimistic in their analysis and result in those children not receiving the right help at the earliest point in time.
5. Following the recent implementation of a new family help model, children receive both targeted early help and statutory services from workers in the new

family help teams. For some children in need, their assessments and plans are undertaken by an alternatively qualified family practitioner and the work is overseen by a social worker. Children with higher levels of need are allocated to a social worker. The move to the new model has been carefully thought through. Partner agencies are well informed about the changes and what the model aims to achieve for children. Family practitioners are appropriately skilled and trained and have been successfully supported into their new roles and new ways of working with children in need. Children and families are already benefiting from the consistency of worker, with the right level and type of help being provided at the earliest point in time.

6. Most children's lives are improved by the provision of the right types of support and interventions in accordance with their child and family plans. These plans are regularly reviewed to monitor progress. Work with parents enables them to better understand and meet their children's emotional needs and they are purposefully engaged to support and help improve their children's lives. The relationship, strengths-based model of practice is highly effective in drawing on the support of the wider network of family and friends, to help achieve positive and sustainable change. This strongly inclusive approach, involving wider family and friends, continues throughout the period of help and support for the child.
7. Children at risk of neglect and/or domestic abuse, including disabled children, receive appropriate support from a range of specialist services that help to reduce the impact of harm. These interventions provide practical advice to parents and help them to develop skills and strategies to better meet their children's needs. For a small number of children in need, the support they receive ceases before sustainable change has been achieved, resulting in a subsequent period of social work intervention.
8. Disabled children benefit from planned interventions, including short-break packages, that help to bolster family life. They also receive an effective and timely multidisciplinary service when they are approaching adulthood, to support them and their families to achieve a successful transition to adult services.
9. Children who are young carers value the support that they receive, which helps them 'just to be themselves'.
10. Workers visit children regularly to build relationships and to monitor their progress and safety. Workers undertake meaningful, creative and individualised direct work with children that is structured, planned and very clearly recorded. Social workers and family practitioners are very passionate about their work. They get alongside parents and carers, especially those who are anxious or resistant to intervention, to help them to identify the most appropriate support. Social workers think carefully about how they communicate with disabled children. They make effective use of sensory approaches and talk to those adults who know the child best to ensure that

they use the most suitable and individualised means of communication for the child.

11. When there are potential risks of significant harm for children, timely strategy meetings lead to appropriate decisions for next steps, including the need for child protection enquiries. While strategy meetings are well attended by police and health colleagues, professionals from the wider network for children are not routinely invited to these meetings. This means that the fullest information about children is not always being shared at the earliest point in time to help inform decision-making and next steps.
12. Child protection enquiries are comprehensive and informative, and children are seen quickly and alone. These robust enquiries lead to outcomes that are proportionate to children's needs and include an overview of what is thought to be the most impactful way forward for families to achieve change and reduce risk to children. This includes progressing to child protection conferences if necessary.
13. Initial and review child protection conferences and core groups are well attended. Families are actively involved in creating their plans and identifying their goals. Child protection plans are succinct and clear about the actions families and workers need to take to help safeguard children and to reduce risks. Work with children on child protection plans is well targeted and managed. The strength of the family engagement with the plans helps the plans to be effective in reducing risk and improving family situations.
14. When concerns escalate for children or child protection plans do not sufficiently reduce the risk of harm, appropriate decisions are taken to move into the Public Law Outline pre-proceedings process. Letters to parents clearly explain why professionals are considering court action and are sensitively written. Managers maintain robust oversight of the progress of the purposeful and extensive work that is undertaken with children in the pre-proceedings stage. This stage is used positively to achieve change and to support families to stay together. Over half of families are diverted away from court and children remain living at home when it is safe and appropriate.
15. Children at risk of extra-familial harm, including children in care, receive highly effective support from knowledgeable and skilled workers in the specialist multidisciplinary Willow team. Mapping is used to inform safety planning for children, and workers use relationships and individualised direct work to build trust. This helps children to share their fears and worries, and children's needs are better understood by workers. Support for the most vulnerable children is carefully reviewed at high-risk strategy meetings. The risks for many children have been reduced by the interventions and support provided by the Willow team. When some children return to home or care after a period of being missing, return conversations are not used often enough, or well enough, to help workers understand why they go missing.

16. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless or are facing homelessness receive a child-focused, timely and proportionate response. When appropriate, children are helped to come into care, and they receive comprehensive information about their options and entitlements. Joint working with housing services is not always recorded well.
17. A small number of children live in private fostering arrangements. Children are visited regularly, and most arrangements are assessed as being suitable for children.
18. Effective systems are in place to ensure that all children who are electively home educated are safeguarded. Similarly, there is detailed tracking and rigorous oversight of children missing from education, which helps to keep children visible and safeguarded.
19. Management oversight of frontline practice is detailed and thorough. It helps workers to progress plans for children and to bring meaningful and positive change to children's lives. Staff supervision is regular, although there is some variance in the quality and depth of the recording of supervision. Managers have recently undertaken refresher training on the expectations of supervision to help achieve better consistency of recording.
20. When families are struggling, a new team of specialist intensive workers delivers a broad range of highly successful interventions that help to keep families together and enable many children to remain living at home safely. Workers are creative, flexible and thoughtful in their approach, and include a wide range of family members to help strengthen support and family resilience for children. The work of this new intensive team is carefully planned and regularly reviewed and is making a significant difference to many families.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding**

21. When children do come into care, it is for the right reasons, and most come into care in a planned way. Many children, including disabled children, make excellent progress in care. The planning and thinking around their long-term permanence plans start early and social workers consider all viable options. There is a strong focus on keeping brothers and sisters together whenever possible. Managers understand the importance of achieving permanence for children in care and closely track the progress of plans for children who are still waiting to achieve permanence. While many children benefit from living in stable homes and with carers who provide nurturing care, a small number of children experience too many moves before permanence is achieved for them. Managers have good oversight of these children's experiences and are working on plans to achieve greater stability.
22. Children in care are supported to live with kinship carers and to stay within their family and communities whenever possible. Children and kinship carers benefit from a newly created team of skilled and experienced practitioners that

provides timely assessment and a wide range of specialist services. This is helping to create stable homes for children within their own network of family and friends.

23. For some children in care, their family situations improve, and they are supported to return home to the care of their parents after a period of careful planning and assessment. The vast majority of children in care who are living with their parents are making good progress and they receive a range of appropriate support. Their plans are regularly reviewed to ensure that they are receiving good care. Applications to discharge care orders are only made when the time is right.
24. A very small number of children in care under 16 live in unregistered children's homes which are in the process of applying for registration with Ofsted. There is robust oversight of the quality of these arrangements by senior managers and children are seen regularly by social workers.
25. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) regularly review children's care plans, and many have developed enduring relationships with children over long periods of time. Children in care are aware of their care plans and understand them. Their plans are lively, child-focused documents which explore their needs, identity and culture well. They are written to them and their imprint within plans is evident. Social workers ensure that planning is purposeful and measurable and helps children to make progress. IROs follow up children's progress between reviews and write warm and sensitive letters to children that help them to understand the decisions reached and the progress that they are making in their lives. IROs are positive about the recent additional investment in their service, which is enabling them to quality assure the care planning for children in care effectively, and to ensure that children's wishes and feelings are fully considered.
26. Social workers get to know their children well and develop trusted relationships with them. This helps children not only to share their worries, but also their aspirations and dreams. Social workers visit children in accordance with their needs and spend time listening to children's views to help to inform their care plans. Workers are strong advocates for children in care, alongside their independent advocates and independent visitors. Children willingly engage in meaningful and creative direct work and are helped to understand their childhood experiences and histories. Life-story work is completed at the right time and at a pace that reflects children's individual needs. Family time for children in care is carefully considered and regularly reviewed. Children are helped to maintain and re-establish important relationships with brothers and sisters, absent parents and other family members when it is safe and appropriate to do so.
27. Children in care are helped by their carers and social workers to be healthy and most have their initial health needs identified in a timely way. They are also very well supported by the ambitious and highly effective virtual school. Their

personal education plans (PEPs) help them to make good progress in school and they are quickly supported to learn English when this is not their first language. PEPs are used to robustly track children's progress and identify when they are struggling, so that support can be offered in a timely way.

28. Specialist workers in the new refugee team provide high-quality support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care. Unaccompanied children in care live in a range of suitable homes, with carers who understand their journeys and can meet their needs. Education provision is arranged quickly, and they are supported to make friends and settle into the community as much as possible. They are helped to access services to help them trace important family members from whom they have become separated. Where possible, they are successfully reunited to live with brothers and sisters and other family members in the UK.
29. Effective fostering panel arrangements support the recruitment and approval of prospective foster carers. Foster carers benefit from a wide range of training following approval. A new support model of fostering, that provides a community of informal and formal support around carers and children in care, has been very well received and is increasing the stability of care for children.
30. Children live with adopters who meet their needs. The planning for these children is exceptionally strong and begins early. There is cohesive partnership working between the regional adoption agency (Adopt South) and children's social workers to find suitable adoptive families for children. An extensive training offer is available to adopters and prospective adopters and there is a strong focus on therapeutic parenting. Attendance at training is good and adopters value the high-quality support and training that they receive.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

31. Care leavers benefit from positive relationships with tenacious and determined personal advisers (PAs). PAs build trusting relationships with care leavers and provide good levels of support to them as they prepare to leave care and move into early adulthood and independence. This support is available up to age 25. PAs are ambitious for care leavers and care leavers are actively encouraged to achieve their goals. Care leavers feel confident in contacting their PAs as they know that they will receive the right help and support.
32. Care leavers are supported and encouraged to stay healthy. They are helped to understand their health needs and to register with health professionals. While most care leavers are offered a copy of their health summary, only a small number of them take this up. They have access to specialist services in relation to their specific needs, for example drug and alcohol services and mental health support.
33. All care leavers are supported to understand the local offer and it is translated into different languages when needed. Care leavers benefit from driving

lessons, council tax exemptions, a setting-up home grant and comprehensive financial support to access higher education. The support available for care leavers with specific needs, for example those who are parents, is not explicitly referenced in the offer to help them to fully understand their entitlements.

34. Most pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers and capture their wishes and feelings. Pathway plans help care leavers to review where they are in their lives so that they can understand their progress and consider what they need to do next to achieve their goals. They are supported to complete an independent living skills assessment that identifies their readiness for greater independence. This information is used to inform housing options and supports care leavers to move into suitably matched accommodation that meets their needs.
35. Most care leavers live in a range of suitable accommodation, including supported accommodation, 'staying put' and independent living. PAs ensure that care leavers have all their important documents to become more autonomous in their lives as young adults. They are helped to develop their independence skills, such as budgeting, shopping and cooking, so that they can successfully move to independent living. All care leavers have access to homelessness prevention PAs who provide them with a wide range of information, advice, guidance and direct support to prevent homelessness. Care leavers living in temporary accommodation are helped into suitable accommodation as quickly as possible.
36. The virtual school provides excellent and extensive support to care leavers and many care leavers are achieving well in education, employment and training. A growing number of care leavers benefit from a comprehensive support package which helps them achieve in higher and further education. The offer provides stability of accommodation and financial security that supports them to focus on and complete their studies and to achieve their long-term career goals. Care leavers can also access funding for specialist training and those who are not in education, employment or training are encouraged and helped to return and to pursue their aspirations.
37. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers benefit from specialist PAs in the refugee team who are highly committed and ambitious for them. Those who have the right to remain have their key documents so that they can secure housing or employment.
38. PAs are strong advocates for care-experienced parents and help them to understand children's services processes and support when there are worries about their children. A newly created parenting group has been established and this provides care leavers with an opportunity to meet other parents and receive support from PAs if desired.
39. Care leavers in custody receive support and are visited face to face. They are made aware of their financial entitlements and are helped with accommodation on their return to the community.



40. Following the focused visit in 2023, leaders have taken wide-ranging action to improve the participation of care leavers in the work of the corporate parenting board. A new care-experienced adults council, and a participation offer, have been created to enable care leavers to have a stronger and more influential voice in the services provided to them. Several new initiatives designed by care leavers have recently been implemented. However, it is too soon to see any measurable and sustainable impact on how care leavers are helping to shape and influence the services and support offered to them. Plans are in place to enable care leavers to have direct access to the corporate parenting board from July 2024.

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

41. Strong and stable political and corporate leadership is making a positive difference to children's lives. The substantial investment and commitment by the council to transforming children's services have enabled the improvement journey to continue and the workforce to grow. Political leaders understand the vision for transforming children's social care and are well informed about all aspects of children's services delivery. Successful succession planning has ensured the smooth transition of the executive leadership of children's services, and carefully mitigated the impact of such significant change for staff and partners and on services. Children's services senior leaders are unwavering in their ambition for children and strive to achieve even better services for them. There is no sense of complacency in their approach, and they have a clear strategic vision and an ever-evolving blueprint for the future of children's services.
42. Robust governance systems and a range of well-functioning partnership boards regularly monitor and review the effectiveness of support and services that work to safeguard children. The family judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and key strategic partners report favourably on practice, on the strength and maturity of strategic relationships and on the quality and approach to partnership working.
43. As good corporate parents to children in care and care leavers, members of the council and senior leaders are resolute in their intent and commitment to providing children in care and care leavers with the same opportunities and experiences as other children and young adults. They have worked together to strengthen and improve the voice of children in care and care leavers in the corporate parenting board, establishing a new children in care council, a care-experienced adults council and a new participation offer. This new approach to corporate parenting is in its infancy and it is too early to measure the impact of these initiatives for children in care and care leavers. The depth of support, challenge and scrutiny of performance and services that the corporate parenting board provides to corporate officers and partner agencies is not explicitly recorded.

44. Placement sufficiency is an ongoing challenge and senior leaders have met this challenge head on. A three-year modernising placement programme, which focused on providing the most appropriate homes and support for children in care, has recently ended. This programme has successfully strengthened the quality of council-owned children's homes and improved the support for children in care, foster carers and children living with kinship carers. A new fostering support model is providing excellent informal and formal support to children, foster carers and kinship carers by increasing stability and providing children and carers with an extended family network around them. The plan to open an additional children's home later this year is on target and senior managers are working proactively with independent providers to create further capacity and to register new children's homes.
45. The senior leadership team has a thorough and accurate overview of service strengths and a clear line of sight into most performance and practice. There is an extensive array of performance management reports and tracking. Most areas that require improvement or development are captured in an overarching and extensive quality improvement plan. Senior leaders use performance management information and quality assurance activity to alert them to any deterioration in practice and performance. This enables them to take quick and decisive action to support teams. They also recognise successes. The implementation of a new case recording system has been a significant operational and organisational change. The new system is presenting some challenges and appropriate mitigations are in place.
46. Leaders, managers and staff at all levels across children's services model a culture of open and reflective learning. The learning from the new family help model is already being used thoughtfully to influence future decision-making and service design. Senior leaders continue to make good use of the learning from national, regional and local improvement work, as well as sector-led improvement and external review, to shape practice, support and services to children. They encourage innovation and test out new ways of working with children and their families and they are not afraid to try new approaches. The inclusiveness of the long-standing strengths-based practice model in involving the wider family and friends' network at a very early stage to help support children is a significant and continuing strength of practice.
47. A comprehensive quality assurance framework provides the strategic foundations for organisational learning. A wide range of quality assurance activities are providing the senior leadership team with an accurate insight into most practice areas. Internal peer-led inspections have been particularly valuable in identifying learning. Thematic audits are used well to explore emerging trends and changes in performance and regular practice audits are used to identify practice strengths and areas for development. There is more to do to achieve even greater consistency in the depth and quality of some casework audits.

48. Senior leaders are responding to and managing the challenges and pressures in the workforce well. They acknowledge that staff turnover has impacted on the progress of some children, and on the quality of practice in some teams. Over the last 12 months, staff turnover and vacancies have greatly reduced, and the workforce continues to grow in strength and numbers. Senior leaders have implemented a comprehensive range of measures that focus on staff recruitment, retention, remuneration and well-being. These measures have been effective in helping to stabilise the workforce. Career progression is a key focus for retention initiatives, as well as encouraging alternatively qualified workers to consider apprenticeships in social work.
49. Workers benefit from a comprehensive programme of continuous professional development. They value the investment in career progression and the social care managers programme and leadership programme which help them in their professional development. A newly launched online resources library for staff has been very well received.
50. Workers enjoy working for Hampshire and morale is mostly very high. Caseloads across children's services are manageable and workers feel heard and exceptionally well supported in their practice. Many started their early careers in Hampshire and have a strong sense of belonging. Workers across children's services are rightly and immensely proud of their relationships and work with children.

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