

Inspection of South Gloucestershire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 June 2024 to 14 June 2024

Lead inspector: Anna Gravelle, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection in 2019, when the local authority was judged requires improvement to be good, and the focused visit in 2021, which identified areas for priority action, the pace of progress has accelerated and services for children in need of help, care and support have significantly improved. A stable senior leadership team, increased investment, strengthened partner agency working and a whole-council approach to children have all contributed to improved services that are bettering the lives of children and young people in South Gloucestershire. This progress has been supported by a well-targeted corporate plan. An embedded and impactful quality assurance framework, bolstered by clear practice standards, has also helped to consolidate high-quality support for children and their families.

A highly effective early help service is ensuring that children receive timely responses that meet their needs, and a newly created multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is ensuring a strong response to children in need or at risk of harm. Highly effective life-story work is helping children to understand their family history and reasons for entering care. A considered and robust response to 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless is ensuring that their needs are properly met.

What needs to improve?

- The take-up, timeliness and impact of return home interviews.
- Transitional support into adulthood for care leavers.
- Clarity of offer and consistent oversight of the response to care leavers post 21.
- Leadership and management oversight of practice that is informed by high-quality performance information.

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

1. Children and families receive a highly effective response when referred to the 'front door' or the MASH. Considerable improvements, with manager oversight and decision-making rationale, have strengthened the timeliness and quality of responses for children.
2. Children and families benefit from a range of timely and effective early help services. Practitioners are skilled at engaging with and supporting children to improve their situations. The interface between early help and statutory services for children and families is seamless: children are stepped up to statutory services or stepped down to early help appropriately and in line with their needs. Children's early help assessments and plans are thorough. They promote their well-being and lead to progress.
3. Referrals from partner agencies are generally of a consistently strong quality and are appropriately referred to the front door. Joint working between social workers and partner agencies to gather information to inform decision-making for children is effective. Social workers routinely seek and record the consent of parents and older children to make enquiries and, when possible, speak with children to strengthen decision-making.
4. Thresholds for intervention are well understood and consistently applied by partner agencies, social workers and managers to ensure that children receive the right help when needed.
5. The out-of-office-hours service provides an appropriate, timely response when children are at risk of, or have suffered, harm. Effective multi-agency working and well-considered assessments of risk are helping to ensure robust responses that keep children safer.
6. When concerns increase, child protection strategy meetings are held promptly and assess risks to children effectively. There is consistent attendance from relevant partner agencies. Minutes clearly record professional views and the rationale for the decisions made. Actions are generally specific and measurable, which helps workers to implement them, and to understand their impact in reducing risks to children.
7. Child protection enquiries are thorough, and workers ensure that children are visited promptly and have opportunities to meet with social workers on their

own. Workers focus on the experiences of children and the impact of potential harm on them to inform their next steps. They ensure that absent parents are consulted and involved in decision-making to help improve children's situations.

8. For those children who need an assessment, their needs are thoroughly considered, and this work is underpinned by the local authority's chosen strengths-based model. Workers carefully balance needs, risks and strengths to prioritise help for children. This work is supported by frequent visits to children and families in line with their needs. Social workers routinely ensure that children's views are heard and included. Assessments are clearly written and help children and their families to understand what needs to change.
9. The threshold to proceed to an initial child protection conference is understood well and applied appropriately. Meetings are well attended by partner agencies, children and parents alike. Minutes comprehensively capture professionals' views about both family strengths and their concerns for children. Social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) discuss children's needs and progress between their review meetings. However, this reflective discussion is not routinely recorded to evidence this additional positive oversight and to demonstrate a clear record of decision-making for children.
10. The quality of children's plans and planning is generally strong. Appropriate actions set out what is needed to help keep children safe. Most plans include contingency planning should needs escalate and to help prevent delay in decision-making. For children subject to child-in-need plans, this is less evident.
11. Social workers mostly have positive relationships with children and visit them frequently, both at, and away from, their homes to better understand and meet their individual needs. Children benefit from increased visiting when necessary and at times of crisis. Children's views are routinely captured through a range of creative and meaningful direct work to help inform planning and the support provided.
12. Most children and families benefit from a strong and thoughtful multi-agency response when experiencing domestic abuse. A wide range of specialist, commissioned services and assessment tools are helping to reduce risks and repeated cycles of harm.
13. Children and families benefit from skilled and effective pre-proceedings work within the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings are clearly written and highlight well what needs to change. Senior managers regularly review and monitor children's progress to prevent drift and delay. Children and their families receive high-quality assessments and impactful interventions to help avoid family court proceedings and to keep children with their families when this is safe, possible and in their best interests.
14. When it is no longer safe for children to remain living with their families, there is timely escalation into care proceedings based on authoritative, child-centred assessments. Social workers routinely explore and understand family networks and areas of support when first commencing work with families. This means that this emotional and practical support is provided quickly and is already in

place to be further assessed and revisited if needs escalate. Workers prioritise and support children effectively to remain with their own families where it is in their best interests, including kinship care arrangements, which are used well.

15. Child protection core group and child-in-need review meetings are held regularly to help consider and progress children's plans effectively. Partner agencies consistently attend these meetings to share updates and potential risks. Minutes typically capture children's views and worries well, although not all children of an age where their attendance would be appropriate benefit from the opportunity to do so to enable them to fully understand and contribute to their plans.
16. Disabled children's needs are identified effectively, with appropriate interventions put in place to support them in their day-to-day lives. Social workers are knowledgeable and understand children's individual needs well. They visit children regularly and capture their views through a good range of bespoke communication methods. Social workers work closely with staff from partner agencies to help prioritise children's wider welfare and access to resources in their communities.
17. Children at risk of exploitation and those who go missing from home or care generally receive a strong, multi-agency response to help reduce their risks and needs. Senior managers have regular oversight of these children, and a range of professional meetings are skilfully used to understand the nature and level of extra-familial harm. When children go missing, social workers support parents and carers to take effective action to protect children and make repeated attempts to engage with children. The completion and timeliness of return home interviews remain low, most notably for children in care, because too many children are not being successfully engaged to attend an interview. This means that wider information and intelligence is not always being captured as effectively as it might be to help reduce these incidents.
18. For those children who are 16 and 17 years old and present as homeless, there is a highly responsive and child-centred approach to their needs. A refreshed protocol and practice guide has successfully strengthened staff responses. Children's rights and entitlements are prioritised in line with legislation and their individual wishes. Advocacy support is provided consistently, and for as long as needed, to support children to make informed decisions and have their needs met.
19. The local authority designated officer (LADO) ensures a prompt and comprehensive response to allegations against professionals. Appropriate challenge and awareness-raising about the role are helping to develop wider understanding across partner agencies and other relevant organisations to help protect children.
20. There is robust information-sharing and well-coordinated oversight across services of those children who are electively home educated and those missing education. Senior leaders have increased capacity within these areas of the service to respond appropriately to children and to provide the support they

need. This includes the effective use of focused early intervention work to help to reintegrate a number of children back into education.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

21. Children enter care at the right time and when it is in their best interests. Decision-making is based on comprehensive, risk-based assessments. Children's immediate needs are considered thoughtfully. This is supported by clear manager rationale for decisions and prompt legal advice.
22. Most children in care, including those who have complex needs, live in stable homes with carers who meet their needs. Children report that they live in caring, loving homes where they feel they belong. Children are afforded a range of suitable homes to meet their diverse needs and most children live with foster carers who are well supported and provide good-quality care.
23. For those children on the edge of care there is meaningful and skilled work to engage parents and children to reduce risks. This means that these children are either supported to remain living at home or to come into care in a planned way. Other children safely leave care because of purposeful and well-planned work which enables them to return home to their family supported by a dedicated, therapeutic support service.
24. There is effective consideration and timely permanence planning for those children who cannot remain in their own families. Decisions for children to leave care are appropriate and timely because of suitable early permanence decisions, including adoption or kinship care arrangements. A high proportion of children have secured permanence via special guardianship orders, which is helping them to thrive, living with family members who know and care for them.
25. Children's care plans are comprehensive and accurately reflect their needs and experiences. Children's voices are recorded throughout their plans and most children attend their meetings and contribute to their planning. IROs know children well and are strong advocates for them to ensure their plans are progressed. Plans and wider records are written in a child-friendly and sensitive way to help children understand decisions about their lives.
26. Until relatively recently, some children had experienced numerous changes of social worker. While this has recently improved, it has negatively affected these children's ability to make and maintain consistent relationships with their workers. Children now benefit from more permanent social workers who have the time, and make considerable efforts, to build long-lasting relationships with them.
27. Children benefit from independent advocacy when needed, and social workers or IROs mostly advocate clearly on children's behalf and support them to attend meetings. This is helping to ensure that their voices are heard and that plans are in their best interests.

28. Disabled children in care, including those living out of the local authority area, benefit from meaningful relationships with their social workers. Disabled children live in homes that meet their needs with effective oversight of their progress and any potential risks through IRO visits and use of advocacy services to capture their experiences. Planning in preparation for adulthood is timely and well thought through to meet children's needs as they become adults.
29. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive both high levels and a high quality of support and care. Workers are culturally attuned to their individual needs to ensure the best possible life chances for them. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in suitable homes that meet their needs. They benefit from an innovative, child-centred approach by senior leaders to expedite children's right to access English for speakers of other languages courses, while college places are awarded through purchasing from local providers and virtual support.
30. Social workers understand the importance of maintaining children's relationships with their brothers and sisters. The completion of assessments to consider children's best interests and needs in relation to these important relationships is prioritised when they enter care. Family time is promoted to provide children with positive opportunities to be in touch with their families. Parents are thoughtfully supported by social workers to engage positively with their children. This helps children to feel settled and to maintain links with those most important to them.
31. Children's physical and emotional health needs are routinely assessed and met. The local authority's joint work with health agencies has recently significantly improved the timeliness of initial health assessments and is ensuring that an increasing number of children in care have timely and regular access to a dentist. Senior leaders are aware that they have more to do and have effective plans in place to strengthen this further. Those who have experienced trauma or have complex needs are provided with the much-needed specialist care and therapeutic support they need, including with bereavement and past trauma.
32. Social workers are thoughtful and sensitive in their approach to working with children, which helps them to build trusting relationships. Children are afforded well-planned, direct work supported by extremely diligent and high-quality life-story work that is delivered at the child's pace. This helps support them to understand their history, identities and future plans. Later life letters from professionals and parents are beautifully written and are provided at the time of adoption so that children and their adoptive parents have these from the earliest point.
33. Education support to children by the virtual school is effective, helping them to make meaningful educational progress within their individual capabilities. Robust personal education plans (PEPs) are helping to ensure that children's specific needs are met and regularly reviewed. Those who are not in education are supported through individually tailored plans to explore alternative

opportunities and additional help. Children are helped to access a variety of social and recreational activities, which they enjoy.

34. The fostering service functions effectively. Managers have comprehensive oversight of the service. They have developed creative and targeted activities that have increased fostering capacity, sufficiency and support. While the fostering panel provides a generally effective quality assurance function, children's voices are not always captured effectively in panel minutes. Decisions about the suitability of new foster carers are informed by detailed assessments.
35. Foster carers benefit from preventative therapeutic support to help them to meet the needs of the children in their care. The successful implementation of such targeted support has directly contributed to improved stability for children. Social workers visit foster carers regularly and have positive relationships that support them in caring for children.
36. The arrangement with the regional adoption agency (Adoption West) to provide adoption services for the local authority is effective. There is a strong focus on early permanence and children do not experience delay in being placed with adoptive parents. The local authority's strong work to support children with adoption and effective joint working with the regional adoption agency has helped to ensure that there have been no adoption breakdowns for a sustained period. High-quality assessments and personalised life-story books are a particular strength.
37. Children's and young people's participation groups are well managed and enjoyed by children and young people, this includes the Teen Care Council and EPIC. They offer an opportunity to catch up with friends and share their views about the care and support they receive. Children and young people are very active members, and have significantly contributed to the well-considered plans in place to further improve and develop services. Some recent developments include the creation of a goodbye letter for children when services end and the successful creation of a post-21 worker for care leavers. The recent recruitment of three young ambassadors, and a proactive youth board, is helping lay the foundations for children and young people to play an increased role in the co-production and shaping of services.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

38. Care leavers have positive, trusting and stable relationships with their personal advisers. Personal advisers are highly committed to their young people, are ambitious for their futures and celebrate their achievements. Care leavers are supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. They have access to a range of social and recreational opportunities that support them in feeling part of their community.
39. There is currently inconsistency in when children get a personal adviser, and this means that too often young people do not meet their personal advisers sufficiently early to make relationships prior to transition into the care leaver team. Social workers support children well in their preparation for them leaving care and ensure practical help and planning are in place in readiness for their

transition to adulthood. Nonetheless, care leavers do not have the chance to establish a relationship with the worker who will stay with them for the next three or more years. Senior leaders have an aspiration for children to build a relationship with their personal adviser before they leave care at 18 and plans are under way to strengthen this through increased resources and stability of the workforce.

40. Care leavers are generally being helped well to improve their physical and mental health. Personal advisers provide practical support to help ensure that they understand their health histories and know how to access universal services when they need to. Accessing routine dental treatment is also an issue for some care leavers and work is under way with health colleagues to address this.
41. Care leavers are largely assisted to understand their rights and entitlements. Personal advisers support young people when they have complaints and there is use of independent advocacy when needed. The local offer for care leavers is comprehensive and has been strengthened by partner agencies, including housing, local voluntary services and businesses. Young people have been actively involved in the development of the service and review of the offer, which has led to an increase in benefits and entitlements, including a significant water rate reduction and free coffees at local cafes.
42. A small number of young people spoken to during the inspection do not understand the full breadth of their entitlements, although largely they are receiving them with the support of their personal advisers and the use of an accessible app detailing the local offer available. Some personal advisers are less clear about what those care leavers over 21 are entitled to. Although most care leavers over 21 who are in receipt of a service are receiving strong support and the necessary entitlements, this lack of understanding by staff limits senior leaders' ability to be assured that this is the case for all. In addition, records for a small number of care leavers post 21 are not consistently updated or explicit about whether there are further support needs. Senior leaders are in the process of reviewing and strengthening the post-21 offer for care leavers. There is more to do but they have already put in place a care leaver coordinator to advise on the offer when needed and recently appointed a post-21 worker who is about to commence in role.
43. Personal advisers ensure that pathway assessments accurately reflect young people's needs. Pathway plans are regularly reviewed and are written in the young person's voice to capture their wishes and feelings. Personal advisers ensure that care leavers' experiences, progress and wider cultural and identity needs are reflected in their plans. This enables an accurate reflection of their current situations. Care leavers have access to the key documents they need for adulthood, including passports, birth certificates and National Insurance numbers. Personal advisers sensitively respond to those care leavers who wish to access their records and ensure they have the emotional support needed when necessary.

44. Personal advisers understand the needs and strengths of those more vulnerable care leavers and work effectively with partner agencies to reduce risks from issues such as exploitation, mental ill health and alcohol or drug misuse. Care leavers who are parents or who sought asylum as children receive effective, tailored support to meet their individual needs. Care leavers who live out of the local authority area also receive the full financial and practical support available to young people who live in South Gloucestershire to help them progress into adulthood.
45. The very small number of young people in custody benefit from regular contact with their personal advisers, who act as strong advocates for them and are persistent in providing practical and emotional help.
46. Senior leaders have proactively recognised that almost half of care leavers, slightly fewer than the average for similar local authorities, are not accessing education, employment or training. With the support of the virtual school, personal advisers are committed to supporting care leavers to access education, employment and training, but too many are not currently doing so. The local authority's corporate and political leaders are aware that this is an area they need to improve and have invested heavily to address this through employability programmes, mentoring support, career coaches and local employer partnerships. Practical opportunities are provided through voluntary work and online training to develop young people's confidence. Senior leaders have robust oversight of these young people through frequent panels and some care leavers are starting to make progress, but there is more to do. A small number of apprenticeships are available for care leavers within the council and staff are currently being recruited to improve this offer more widely.
47. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Social workers and personal advisers help young people to prepare practically for adulthood through the use of a commissioned independent living skills programme. This helps ensure young people have the skills and confidence needed to live independently. Some children and care leavers also benefit from the opportunity to practise and develop their skills in readiness for living alone through training flats.

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

48. The members of the children's services senior leadership team, with the support of corporate and political leaders, understand and prioritise the needs of children. This means that children and their families are now receiving significantly improved and more effective services than at the time of the last inspection in 2019 or the focused visit in 2021 that identified areas for priority action. The chief executive and executive director of children's social care have fully grasped the challenges to improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and families through a whole-council approach. Substantial investment and a vision shared by corporate and political leaders have enabled a restructure of

directorates and resource allocation that has prioritised children and care leavers.

49. Children's services are successfully led by a committed and determined executive director (director of children's services) who has provided the much-needed strength, stability and persistent vision to improve services for children and care leavers. A permanent senior leadership team and the intelligent intervention of an interim children's service director have enabled a sharper focus and a tighter grip on delivering improvement at pace. Senior leaders have successfully embedded a strengths-based model to improve practice and recording across the service.
50. Political leaders are highly informed about and supportive of children's services. They work as a collective to improve services through their focused corporate plan, which has children at its heart. The chief executive and lead member provide the much-needed scrutiny and challenge to the executive director to ensure strong practice for children. Senior leaders understand well the strengths and areas for further improvement in the services provided to children and their families.
51. Senior leaders have mature relationships with partner agencies which are effecting positive change for children and young people. The successful implementation of the MASH and robust challenge through the children's safeguarding partnership has strengthened information-sharing and partnership working, and is helping reduce risks to children. Effective work by the local authority's leaders and escalation to the integrated care board have improved the attendance of health professionals at multi-agency meetings for children.
52. Senior leaders are committed and caring corporate parents who understand their responsibilities to the children in their care. They are ambitious to provide high-quality services to children. This is evident in the recent injection of resources within the children in care service to significantly reduce workloads, providing more time and space to social workers and so strengthening the quality of their relationships with children. Senior leaders commission a wide range of specialist services to support children's well-being and provide a range of suitable and stable homes to help children thrive. The local authority hub-based model of support for foster carers is a strength and plans are in place to extend these in the very near future. A strong sufficiency strategy is enabling senior leaders to plan effectively for the future, and plans are already in motion with multi-agency partners, to open their own children's homes and extend supported living accommodation.
53. A thorough understanding of the local, evolving population and demographics is enabling an individualised approach to supporting children and young people living in South Gloucestershire. This is most evident in the impressive response to supporting the significant number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to access English for speakers of other languages courses. The local authority is proactive in gaining meaningful feedback from families to inform service development and to learn from complaints to improve responses to children and their families.

54. There is an increasingly effective focus on supporting first-line managers, to help ensure that the management oversight they provide to staff is generally strong across children's services and is effective in strengthening responses for vulnerable children. Staff report consistent and helpful oversight and direction from their managers; however, the recording of this oversight is not always as consistently strong within the care leaver service.
55. A much-developed and effective quality assurance framework has helped achieve practice improvements through well-considered audit work and routine moderation. Audits are generally completed with social workers to enrich the process and to aid learning. Considered use of feedback from parents and children deepens workers' understanding about practice and also captures the strengths of some work with children and families. Extensive work through thematic dip sampling, deep dives, group supervision and staff conferences informs training and is contributing to wider service development. Senior leaders have strengthened the quality of performance management information and monitoring to gain a much better line of sight to frontline practice. While the quality of data is not yet consistently of the standard the local authority aspires to, they have ensured that it is both up to date and reliable in priority areas and those that are most reliant on real-time data. This is most evident within the MASH, and workers and managers alike use data dashboards to ensure timely and quality decision-making for children. There is more to do to make sure this is established and used systematically to provide a more accurate understanding of the quality and impact of practice across children's services.
56. Staff told inspectors that senior leaders are visible and available and that they appreciate the more recent, increased direction they receive from team managers. Staff share a culture of high support balanced with an appropriate degree of challenge and a strong sense of being cared for by managers and leaders alike. This nurturing approach is what helps retain staff within South Gloucestershire. As in most local authority areas, consolidating and stabilising the workforce has been a priority. Recruitment and retention rates since the last inspection have significantly improved. A thorough and creative workforce strategy has resulted in some success in the recruitment of international workers and agency workers converting to permanent roles.
57. Staff are overwhelmingly positive about working for South Gloucestershire Council. Staff report feeling heard and responded to by senior leaders. Reduced workloads, increased stability of managers and more business support have strengthened their ability to respond to and improve the quality of practice for children. A wealth of concentrated training, including the Programme for Change initiative, has developed skill sets and expertise of staff. Staff benefit from a clear pathway of career progression, including a bespoke managers development programme.
58. Supervision is in the main consistent, reflective and well recorded. Staff describe manageable workloads, and while there are some pockets of higher workloads in the care leaver service and 0 to 18 service these are regularly reviewed with strong senior manager oversight and support for staff.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children’s social care and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children’s services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This report is available at <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2024