

# Inspection of Cornwall local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 1 to 5 July 2024

**Lead inspector:** Sarah Canto, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the 2019 inspection, much of Cornwall's good practice has been maintained and previous areas for improvement have been strengthened. A small number of discrete areas of practice have not been maintained at the same standard. Practice for care leavers is now stronger than services for children in care. Since the previous inspection, there have been four directors of children's services, including an interim director. Leaders have successfully achieved continuity, with the current director having a clear vision and plan for ongoing development. Leaders have a good understanding of areas of practice in need of improvement and responded proactively to any issues raised in the inspection. There are clear plans for necessary improvements.

The introduction of new initiatives and the ongoing development of existing services to respond flexibly to the increasing needs of families are notable achievements. The strength of support to care leavers, which has further improved from an already high standard, the range and depth of early help services and the quality of support to children who are homeless particularly shine through. This improvement is impressive in the context of rising levels of need in recent years, particularly for those families living in areas of high deprivation where the impact of neglect is significant.

The director of children's services and her senior leadership team have a determined focus on improving children's lives. The strong backing of council leaders and politicians whose vision for Cornwall is to be a 'brilliant place to be a child and grow up' has been accompanied by significant financial investment, both for maintenance and growth. This whole-council approach also supports effective strategic engagement and planning with partner agencies.

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

- The timeliness of child protection strategy meetings.
- The effectiveness of pre-proceedings work, particularly for children living in long-term neglectful situations, so that children come into care at the right time.
- The quality of Public Law Outline letters.
- The day-to-day monitoring of arrangements for children living in unregistered children's homes.

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

1. Most children who need help and protection achieve improved outcomes due to receiving effective services.
2. Early help arrangements are impressive. Support provided by local authority staff is well coordinated, with the services available from a broad range of partner agencies to meet the needs of children through a whole-family approach. The interface between early help and statutory work is managed well and children and families' lives improve tangibly as a result of early help intervention. Most children's needs are addressed at the earliest stage, helping to ensure that needs and risks do not escalate to the point that children need a statutory intervention.
3. Referrals about children made to the early help hub and the multi-agency referral unit (MARU) are mostly responded to and assessed in a timely and effective way, with proportionate recommendations. Clear management oversight supports children's situations being understood and progressed in a way that helps keep children safe.
4. In the main, decisions made in the MARU to progress to child protection strategy meetings are appropriate. However, not all strategy meetings are held in a timely manner, with some being delayed during the transfer of children's cases to the Family Assessment teams. Action is taken to help ensure the immediate safety of children but some children have experienced delay between the identification of risk and a meeting taking place to agree next steps and the provision of services to help keep them safe. When this concern was identified to the local authority by inspectors, leaders took immediate

action to put in place a system and practice guidance to ensure that, going forward, timescales for strategy discussions and interim safety plans are always set out and, if not adhered to, the reason for this is recorded and can be followed up. When strategy meetings are held, they are effective and well attended by partner agencies, arriving at a comprehensive understanding of risks, strengths and next steps, leading to effective child protection investigations where necessary.

5. The response to children and families identified as at potential risk outside of office hours is effective and well connected to daytime services. The service is managed effectively and with clear oversight. Staff routinely visit children out of office hours to follow up on concerns and consider their best interests.
6. The quality of assessments is mostly good, with families' strengths and children's needs clearly understood. Help is given to families during the assessment phase so that they do not need to wait to receive services that will make a positive difference to their welfare. This includes, for those children who need it, help from effective edge of care services, which best supports children to remain within their families and helps to divert them from needing a longer-term service or to come into care.
7. Some children's records do not always have detailed handovers when transfers are made between social work teams, to support the timely completion of some actions for children.
8. Children in need are well supported. Disabled children's experiences are carefully understood by workers, with plans and support provided which result in positive changes for them and their families, reducing the risk of family breakdowns.
9. Child protection planning, including for disabled children, has clear and timebound actions that demonstrate to families when they are, or are not, making progress. Core groups are well attended, and partner agencies contribute effectively, both in terms of the discussion and in terms of taking accountability for their part in realising the plan.
10. Social workers know their children well and their visits to them are regular and in line with children's needs, so they can build a meaningful relationship with their workers. A range of highly effective specialist services are in place to support families, such as services to address domestic abuse, sexual abuse, substance misuse and poor child mental health, and to provide clinical support services. Social workers deploy these effectively to support families to make progress.
11. Pre-proceedings arrangements as part of the Public Law Outline are not sufficiently effective, as too many children remain in this process for too long and some do not always get the help they need at the earliest point. This is particularly the case for those children living in long-term neglectful situations.

This means that, for some children, they may not receive timely enough assessment and support to help them to remain living with their families safely, while for others, it can take too long for them to come into care when this is the right decision for them.

12. Pre-proceedings letters to parents are not of a sufficient quality to help families and professionals bring about positive change for children. Too often they are neither clear about what the concerns are, nor sensitively written. This risks parents not being clear about what needs to change and is not in the spirit of the organisation's strengths-based approach to children and families. Supervision for social workers is mostly regular and addresses risk, although some actions lack timescales.
13. Supervision is mostly regular and addresses risk, with some records showing reflection as well as being task-focused. A minority of supervision actions lack timescales, which makes it harder to track progress for some children.
14. Children and young people who go missing, and those at risk of exploitation, receive a robust multi-agency response, with regular senior oversight for those most at risk. Specialist lead workers have an effective dual role of providing advice to social workers to help support safety planning and tracking events to see mounting trends and risks to alert council departments and agencies as necessary.
15. The systems put in place by the local area designated officer to oversee allegations about adults who may be a risk to children are managed effectively and efficiently.
16. Children who are aged 16 and 17 and homeless, or are at risk of being homeless, receive a prompt and appropriate response from social workers that is both persistent and fully mindful of risks. This was an area for improvement at the previous inspection which has been fully addressed to ensure that children have the right support when they need it. Housing officers and social workers work closely together, and children receive specialist advocacy and full information about their rights and entitlements. Consequently, children are actively supported to come into care if they need to.
17. Private fostering arrangements for children are also managed effectively and responsively, with clear management oversight of children living in these homes.
18. The local authority's oversight of children who are home educated and children who are missing from education is highly effective. This 'team around the child' focus strengthens inter-partnership work, including with families, to speedily identify the most appropriate support for the child and address any barriers to receiving education. Where there are risks to children's welfare, children are supported to receive an early help or statutory service, to help them receive appropriate education in a timely manner.

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

19. When children can no longer live with their parents, decisions for children to come into care are appropriate.
20. Once in care, most children live in stable homes and make tangible progress in important areas of their lives. Many children have social workers who know them well. Children build trusting relationships with their social workers, and with youth and family workers who have often known them for a long time. Highly skilled workers understand and respond effectively to the uniqueness and diversity of disabled children who are in care, supporting them to communicate in the way they choose.
21. Children are visited in different environments to better understand their needs and to help them talk openly about their wishes and feelings. Both social workers and children's rights advocates (the term the local authority uses for independent reviewing officers) advocate well for children to help ensure that their needs are met. Children's care plans are thorough and regularly reviewed, reflecting their progress and changing needs.
22. Children's educational needs are prioritised and met well, enhanced by the highly effective virtual school. When children experience changes of school linked to exclusion, social workers work together with schools and carers to minimise disruption to their lives. Much attention is also paid to children's physical and emotional health, to ensure that children get the help they need.
23. Separated children seeking asylum are welcomed warmly and with compassion when they first arrive in Cornwall. A dedicated worker coordinates packages of care to help children feel safe and part of the community, by promoting social activities to prevent social isolation. Children are quickly helped to receive education and are provided with interpreters and legal advice.
24. Children are encouraged to enjoy hobbies, follow their interests, and go on holidays with their carers. Children are supported to maintain links with their families. For a significant number, through the provision of therapeutic support, family relationships are strengthened to the point that children are able to safely return home. A small number of children living at home with parents on a care order do not have placement with parent agreements in place or have written agreements in which the support needs for parents to care for their children are not clearly articulated. However, children subject to these arrangements are visited regularly by their social workers and make progress.
25. A small number of children in care experience multiple changes of social workers and a lack of continuity in planning, due to too many changes in social workers. While this is not the case for most children in care, for this small number, this instability results in children feeling unsettled and their plans not being progressed quickly enough.

26. A very few children live in unregistered children's homes. These highly vulnerable children do not routinely have enough visits from their social workers to ensure that their voices are heard sufficiently and to monitor their well-being and safety. Alongside this, their safety plans are not always updated quickly enough. Some children are spoken to by their children's rights advocate to ascertain their views and understanding of their situation. There is regular strategic senior management oversight, including multi-agency planning, of these arrangements and of the plans for moving children to suitable registered homes as quickly as possible. However, there has not been the same attention to the direct oversight of children's care and day-to-day arrangements given these children's vulnerability and the absence of regulatory oversight to evaluate the quality of their care and how effectively they are protected. When these issues were highlighted during the inspection, senior leaders took immediate action to address these concerns.
27. Children are helped to understand their life story in multiple ways. This essential work is highly effective. It is tailored to their individual needs and allows them to gain a full and accurate representation of their past and present. The therapeutic approach supports children to create positive narratives about themselves and in turn helps them to feel more settled in their home.
28. Children benefit from being found permanent homes that meet their needs in a timely way, helping them to feel secure and settled. Work to secure permanent homes for children through adoption and special guardianship is strong. Children who are subject to special guardianship arrangements receive effective post-order support.
29. Children are provided with a range of appropriate accommodation to suit their needs, including supported lodgings and training flats. However, some children living in supported accommodation experience instability. The quality of case recording does not always best support staff in working with and providing support as effectively as they could with this group of children and young people. Additionally, if children were to come back as adults to read their files, they may not always be able to understand what decisions have been made and why.
30. Assessments of foster carers are timely and largely of good quality. Foster carers say that they feel valued and are generally positive about the support they receive. However, there has been some turnover of supervising social workers, which has had a negative impact on how supported some carers feel. Foster carers benefit from regular mandatory and specialist training to meet the needs of the children using a trauma-informed approach. The recruitment strategy has recently been strengthened to tackle the challenge of ensuring that there are sufficient skilled and local foster carers for Cornwall's children. The move of adoption services to the regional adoption agency (Adopt South West) has been carefully planned to avoid disruption for adopters and children. The sharing of expertise has been beneficial and there are now more adopters available for Cornwall's children. There is effective oversight by the local

authority of the regional adoption agency, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined. Children benefit from the use of early permanence arrangements.

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

31. Care leavers receive an impressive level of support in Cornwall and the local authority's partnership with a specialist commissioned service to young people is exemplary. Care leavers are helped by skilled and compassionate personal advisers who know young people very well. Personal advisers start direct work with young people early so they have sufficient time to develop relationships before they leave care. Care leavers continue to receive support for as long as they need after they turn 21.
32. Personal advisers understand that some young people have experienced trauma which can manifest in fluctuating levels of engagement. Personal advisers visit young people as often as necessary to provide the support they need. Psychologists are an integral part of the service due to the support they provide to young people, and to staff and managers. Through this, care leavers are encouraged and supported to develop and maintain friendship and support networks that they can rely on.
33. Care leavers who arrived in Cornwall as separated children seeking asylum are supported exceptionally well by personal advisers. Their cultural needs are understood, and particular attention is paid to their integration and emotional well-being.
34. Care leavers influence decisions and change through participation in various meetings and events led by young people, such as annual conversations, regular chairing of the corporate parenting board and a range of other opportunities. Many care leavers are also trained to become peer mentors and support other care leavers to engage. Care-experienced young people are employed in youth worker and personal adviser roles. The commissioned service provides a wide range of activities and groups for care leavers and apprenticeship opportunities. Care leavers told inspectors that they feel supported and said that they feel part of a family.
35. Care leavers are supported and encouraged to have their health needs met. They are provided with high-quality support for their emotional well-being and mental health needs and have access to their health information. Pathway plans are comprehensive and written respectfully and carefully to young people, highlighting their voices and experiences. They are completed with young people and include their views and aspirations. Plans are regularly reviewed, and actions enable young people to become independent and confident members of their communities.
36. A high proportion of care leavers are successfully engaged in employment, education or training. The career team plays an instrumental role in building strong relationships with care leavers, providing personalised support and

advice to young people. Those who are not in education, training or employment are helped effectively to build confidence and find options that are right for them.

37. Care leavers mainly live in suitable, stable accommodation that is meeting their needs and where they feel safe. When young people are in custody, they are visited and receive the practical help and support they need, both while in custody and to help them move successfully back into the community.
38. Care leavers who are parents are supported well by personal advisers to manage the demands of young parenthood. Gentle therapeutic support by the specialist well-being personal adviser lead is given to care leavers who are parents who have mental health needs to help them engage with the community perinatal team and psychologists, and their allocated personal adviser. This specialist post is the result of a successful bid to the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities to address the mental health needs of care leavers. This support results in better outcomes for care leavers and their children.
39. The local offer is well developed, clear and accessible to all care leavers. Personal advisers ensure that young people understand and access their entitlements and have all the relevant documents they need.

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

40. Senior leaders and politicians are relentless in their drive to continue to improve the lives of Cornwall's children and families. This is born out in the comprehensive response to areas for improvement that were highlighted in the previous inspection as well as ongoing improvement of other service areas. However, a small number of practice areas have not sufficiently benefited from the same rigorous oversight, which has meant that some children do not receive the support and services they need at the right time.
41. Cornwall's children's rights approach spans across the organisation and this was evident when inspectors spoke to children and young people who are in care or care leavers. This approach is highlighted by care experience now being a protected characteristic in the council. Elected members have made it their priority to understand what is most important to children and young people in Cornwall and the lead member regularly meets with senior leaders to discuss performance.
42. The dedication, commitment and whole-council approach has resulted in not only new creative approaches, services and multidisciplinary ways of working making a difference for children, but also in the recommendations from the previous inspection being comprehensively and creatively addressed. Therapeutic life-story work and direct work is becoming embedded throughout services for children, helping children to understand their life histories and to



feel emotionally secure. The cross-council working that has taken place with the housing department to address the needs of young people aged 16 and 17 at risk of being homelessness and the management oversight of this work through a weekly panel is strong. The local authority is continuing to address the significant challenge of sufficiency to increase the amount and suitability of homes for children and young people.

43. Leaders are proud to be part of an explicitly anti-racist organisation, demonstrated by comprehensive training and awareness-raising in relation to diversity and inclusion. This drive to tackle racism makes a positive difference both for children and staff.
44. The impact of participation arrangements for children in care and care leavers with the commissioned service is strong. Leaders and councillors actively listen to and act on children's and young people's voices and views. As a result, the whole council is attuned to the needs of children. Participation has shaped developments such as the entitlement to free bus travel for care leavers and the ongoing sufficiency planning for suitable homes for young people. Young people's achievements are celebrated, including the remarkably high levels of care leavers who are engaged in education, training or employment. Effective mechanisms are also in place for children, families and carers to say what is important to them so this information can be acted upon.
45. Leaders have continued to focus on and drive forward change within children's services and with partner agencies. The relationships and interconnection between education, community health and children's services are strong and help to foster a consistent approach to children and families. For example, a deep dive analysis into increasing levels of school exclusions has enabled an understanding of where leaders need to focus their efforts. Senior leaders work well to engage partner agencies and have professionally constructive relationships with them. Support for children and young people's emotional well-being and mental health is a clear priority, both in-house with psychologists promoting a trauma-informed approach and in joint working with NHS child and adolescent mental health services.
46. The range and depth of universal and targeted early help services for children and families, provided by the local authority and partner agencies, have progressed further since the last inspection, helping to identify and meet children's needs at an earlier point, before they escalate to the point where they require statutory services. The number of children needing to become the subject of a child protection plan is not increasing in the manner that it has in most similar local authorities and remains lower than these comparators. The added support of targeted youth workers, family and specialist workers across early help, through to children in need, in need of protection and care leavers enables change to be effected through strong relationship-based work.
47. The introduction of domestic abuse support advisers and the Multi-Agency Rapid Response Service (in partnership with Cornwall NHS Foundation Trust)

for children with mental health needs are examples of impressive new multidisciplinary team around the child initiatives that support children and families who are at risk and those children who have the most complex needs. Additionally, the new team Gweres Teylurow, a therapeutic service for younger children at risk of family breakdown, has been independently evaluated and is based on the success of the embedded service Gweres Tus Yowynk, for older children, to prevent children coming into care. The introduction of the Better Homes panel, created since Ofsted's last focused visit in January 2022, also ensures a strong focus on children and young people's permanence needs.

48. The strategic oversight and planning by senior managers and commissioners for the small number of children living in unregistered homes has focused on developing sufficiency and finding the right homes for children as quickly as possible. There is more to do for leaders to assure themselves that while this work takes place, the most vulnerable children's immediate needs are being met when living in homes that do not have the protection and assurance of regulatory oversight.
49. Leaders have continued to develop and strengthen their use of quality assurance and performance management systems to support their understanding of the quality and impact of practice, within a framework that includes parents' and children's views. A substantial volume of audit activity is completed. Findings from audit are used well to help to bring about change for children. The learning from audits is aggregated and reviewed to identify themes and then disseminated across the organisation and to inform practice and further develop services. Quality assurance and performance management systems are comprehensive and are used well by managers at every level, to highlight practice strengths and to understand and target areas for improvement. For example, during the inspection, in response to shortcomings in the timeliness of pre-proceedings work identified by inspectors, leaders said that they had already started to develop a new system to strengthen their oversight of timeliness and quality.
50. Youth and family workers, social workers and managers appreciate and benefit from structured pathways for professional development. Practitioners have a range of feedback mechanisms to express their views, including the annual survey, in which social workers have expressed positive levels of satisfaction about working in Cornwall. A recent development is being successfully piloted for managers, using artificial intelligence to support the accurate recording and reflection of supervision sessions.
51. The workforce is mostly stable with relatively low levels of turnover and reliance on agency staff, despite the particular geographic challenges for Cornwall. There are, however, some limited pockets of the workforce that are under pressure due to sickness and capacity issues, which has had a negative impact on the consistency of the social work response that some children receive.

52. Most children are able to build good relationships with their social worker so they can make progress, alongside support from family workers and youth workers. This is in part due to the ongoing drive to recruit and retain staff so that caseloads are mostly manageable, allowing social workers to have time to visit and support children.
  
53. Staff, many of whom are long-standing, report a very positive working environment where they receive regular supervision and can approach managers and senior leaders for decisions, advice and support. Workers say that they appreciate the financial accountability they have to dynamically support families when absolutely necessary. Staff's care, commitment and child-focused approach shine through when they talk about their work. This positive working environment helps to foster a culture in which an enthusiasm and commitment to do the best for children is found at all levels in the organisation.

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](mailto: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](http://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](mailto: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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2024