

# Inspection of Southend-on-Sea city council local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 14 October 2024 to 25 October 2024

**Lead inspector:** Margaret Burke, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last full ILACS inspection in July 2019, services in Southend have undergone many significant changes. These changes include Southend becoming a city council in March 2022, and there have also been substantial changes in the leadership of the council, within children's services and politically. Leaders at every level in the council have contributed to a programme of change across the whole culture of service delivery, systemically improving services in a sustainable way for children and their families.

Many vulnerable children and their families now benefit from this work. Considerable improvement is evident in help and protection services. Children's service's offer of help, alongside the support from strong partnerships, enables children and their families who need help to be well supported to achieve the necessary improvements in their circumstances. Most children in Southend's care live in stable homes which meet their needs. Care leavers who receive a service are well supported by skilled and purposeful personal advisers who are attuned with and responsive to their needs. Workforce churn has reduced within most service areas.

Inspectors saw the evidence of improvement in all service areas, but there remain some legacy workforce challenges for children in care and foster carer workforce and some discrete areas of practice where improvement is still required.

## **What needs to improve?**

- The response to children aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless.
- The quality and consistency of direct work, including life-story work with children in care.
- The consistency and timeliness of permanence planning for children in care.
- The offer of support to care leavers aged 21+ and the equity of the offer to care leavers who live outside of Southend City.

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

1. Children and families in Southend benefit from early help services that are effective in quickly responding to identified needs. Help is offered collaboratively with families and is responsive to need. Universal service providers are ably assisted by early help coordinators who offer advice and support to services providing help and assistance to families in their communities. Children who require more intensive support are well supported by specialist workers within the supporting families service and other specialist teams, who are tenacious at building relationships with families to enable them to jointly find solutions. The interface between early help and statutory services is generally seamless. Step up and step down between services is appropriately focused on offering help at the least intrusive level.
2. The Children's Single Point of Contact (CSPOC) integrated front door is effective in incorporating Southend's multi-agency response to children in need of early help and children with more complex and significant needs who require a statutory service. Thresholds are well understood. The most recent threshold guidance was co-produced with partner agencies and is supported by routine management oversight to ensure consistency. Referrals received from partner agencies are generally thorough and well recorded, which assists swift decision-making in CSPOC, ensuring children receive the right level of support.
3. Contacts and referrals are managed within a timely and effective system. There is clear management oversight and direction at every stage, ensuring that children with the highest level of need and concern are given priority. Parental consent is appropriately considered. Social workers ensure that children and their families' history and their lived experiences are appropriately taken into consideration to inform decision-making. CSPOC workers are knowledgeable about Southend's wider support services, which enables them to signpost parents effectively to additional services that provide assistance to families. The

emergency duty service also provides an effective response to children's needs outside of office hours.

4. Social workers speak with warmth and knowledge about the children and families they support. They visit children within required frequencies and take time to develop meaningful relationships that support engagement and offer children ample opportunity to share worries, leading to escalating interventions when necessary. Disabled children similarly benefit from skilled social workers who use a range of communication methods to ensure that children's wishes and feelings inform individualised and personalised plans.
5. For most children, including disabled children, their assessments provide a robust analysis of needs and are supported by effective management oversight. Outcomes are child-focused and identify proportionate actions required to improve children's circumstances. Children are routinely seen alone, and their views are captured to gain an understanding of their lived experiences to assist in decision-making. Assessments are shared with families; their views are recorded and, where appropriate, acted upon.
6. The involvement of family networks in planning for children is a strength. Where possible, family networks are used appropriately as the first form of support for children. Family network members are included in initial safety planning and encouraged to remain involved in the ongoing support to children. However, their involvement is not always fully captured in written plans, and plans do not always clarify agreed expectations to demonstrate the effectiveness of these arrangements.
7. Leaders, in recognition of the enduring impact of chronic neglect on children, launched a partnership neglect strategy in January 2024. There is increased evidence of the use of the Graded Care Profile 2 tool being used across early help services to assess families where there are concerns about neglect. There is a wide spectrum of early help and community services to support families living in neglectful home conditions. However, there remains a legacy for a small number of children who have lived in neglectful situations for too long, where previous responses have been ineffective. The response to many of these repeat referrals is now considered more effectively in the CSPOC for decisive action to be taken. Leaders have recognised that there is more to do, as they continue to sharpen their response to children living in neglect.
8. When children and their parents are affected by domestic abuse and violence, commendable and determined work is undertaken by a wide range of agencies in the community to help to engage parents and minimise risk. Social workers have a good understanding of the risks presented by domestic abuse and often work sensitively with families to help them understand and reduce these risks. In a few cases, however, decision-making is over-influenced by the presenting lack of parental cooperation. Leaders are aware of this and are taking action to continue to improve the quality of support provided to children at risk of domestic abuse.

9. Most children receive an appropriate and proportionate response when risks to their well-being escalate. Strategy discussions are attended by relevant multi-agency partners who share relevant information to inform the analysis of risk. Appropriate immediate action is taken to reduce risk and vulnerability, and children are seen promptly. Child protection investigation enquiry outcomes are clearly documented and lead to follow-up strategy meetings when information is fluid and evolving.
10. Child protection conferences are held in line with Southend's new model of practice. Child protection chairs now routinely visit parents in their homes prior to the conference to help demystify the process, supporting parents to prepare for these meetings to increase their participation. The quality of child protection chairs' midway monitoring and footprint is increasing in its effectiveness, critically appraising the progress made and triggering the acceleration of plans for children.
11. Children who have child in need and child protection plans are well supported by the professionals working together in a coordinated way to help them make progress. Core groups and child in need meetings are held regularly and are well attended by families and relevant professionals. Meetings are held in line with the child's needs. Written plans, while often long and detailed documents, are not routinely explicit enough about what needs to improve, and by when. Effective information-sharing, joint planning and decision-making in these multi-agency review meetings determine and inform next steps, often compensating for the lack of clarity in written plans.
12. Children at risk of family breakdown are supported effectively, with timely, appropriate support from the well-established edge of care team. The support offered to children and families is purposeful and effective, drawing in support from within the family network when appropriate, using a blend of evidence and relational-based interventions that are effective in achieving agreed targets. As a result, the experiences and progress of these children improve.
13. When children and young people are at risk of exploitation in Southend, they benefit from a prompt and highly effective response from the exploitation team. Assessments are thorough, carefully considering cultural and push and pull factors. There is appropriate focus on disruption activities. Detailed planning with measures and interventions to reduce and mitigate risk enable children to successfully move out of exploitive situations. The oversight of the multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) forum contributes to the development of the partnership response to reduce the risk of exploitation.
14. Southend provides an effective response to children who go missing from home or care. Workers make repeated attempts to see children and talk to them about their missing period. The vast majority of children are offered a return home interview. Targeted plans are in place regarding frequently missing young people, and concerns are appropriately escalated to draw in support from wider support services.

15. The local authority designated officer service is effective in managing allegations made about professionals who pose a risk to children. The service has clear and well-understood processes to ensure children's safety.
16. Work to safeguard unborn babies is rigorous and ensures they are appropriately protected at birth. Social work pre-birth assessments are highly detailed and evaluative. Plans are specific and are explained to parents to ensure they understand what is expected of them to keep their children safe.
17. When the decision is made to instigate the pre-proceedings process, most Public Law Outline (PLO) plans promote parents' and families' involvement to enable them to be fully engaged in the understanding of risk and are explicit about changes required. Leaders have taken action to improve the timeliness of children moving into pre-proceedings in response to a small number of children who had not moved into pre-proceeding early enough. This increased management grip has resulted in child protection and PLO planning becoming more aligned to ensure PLO processes are now entered into at the right time. When the decision is made to issue care proceedings, the need for this is clearly articulated in authoritative social work statements. Both the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) speak positively about Southend's performance in the court arena.
18. While all 16- and 17-year-old children presenting as homeless are provided with an assessment of need and are actively supported, they are not consistently provided with a response that outlines their rights and entitlements. Work is ongoing to sharpen up processes for these children.
19. Children who are living in private fostering arrangements receive a thorough assessment of their needs. Their carers are also appropriately assessed to ensure they can provide the minimum standard of care. Southend leaders are active in ensuring professionals and the public are aware of private fostering and the required reporting arrangements.
20. Proactive work is being undertaken to identify young carers at a younger age and to ensure that they are receiving effective support. The service actively supports schools to adopt the young carers passport scheme to reduce the need for children to have to repeat their stories or explain lateness or absence of homework.
21. Southend's approach to identifying children missing in education is robust and child-centred, with prompt action taken to locate vulnerable children. The authority works effectively across agencies, ensuring swift referrals and a proactive response. Effective systems are in place to identify risk when children are being electively home educated.

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

22. Children who have recently entered care have done so appropriately in response to risk and to ensure their needs are appropriately met. Oversight by senior management is evident, with children increasingly benefiting from the additional scrutiny now provided by independent reviewing officers (IROs) checking early planning and arrangements. Placement planning meetings are convened promptly.
23. Most children leave care through structured planning following careful work to reduce risks and ensure that this decision is in their best interest. Decisions to discharge care orders, or progress adoption or special guardianship orders, are informed by clear plans.
24. Children in care who live with their parents or relatives do so following careful planning. Priority is placed on enabling children to live within their family networks when this is a feasible option. Most assessments are comprehensive and evaluative and are reviewed by the local authority at a senior level. Assessments are routinely updated to ensure the suitability and sustainability of the arrangements. Family placements are supported, risk assessments are undertaken and visits take place at an appropriate frequency to support the child in their family. Any plans to move children are considered from a child-focused perspective.
25. Children's progress is comprehensively reviewed in their review meetings. Most care plans are clear and comprehensive. They set out relevant actions to be completed and are timebound. They are succinct and child-focused, capturing children's important priorities, and updated regularly. Children proudly told inspectors about their recently completed work to change how their review meetings take place. They were excited about the move from formal business meetings to more interactive meetings in their foster carers' homes so that they can attend and participate. A few children are supported by independent advocates. The oversight and rigour provided by IROs are strengthening as they emerge from a period of change and churn in the service. They now increasingly exercise challenge to prevent drift and delay for children.
26. Most social workers take time and care to build quality relationships with children. However, for a small number of children, when their circumstances become fragile, visits are not always increased to provide added support and oversight. Some children told inspectors that they have had many changes of social workers and IROs; therefore, some children did not have strong or trusting relationships with their social workers or IROs.
27. Direct work with disabled children is sensitively attuned and tailored to the unique communication profiles of children. Work with these children's parents and extended family members is thoughtful and considerate of their views and

enables them to be integrally involved in their children's care planning and reviews.

28. Direct work, including life-story work with children who have been in care for longer periods of time, is too limited. Life-story work for children who are being prepared to live with their adoptive families starts too late and is only completed in time for the final adoption hearing. This results in missed opportunities to support children and their carers through transitions and to ensure that all children in care are supported to understand their family history. Aligned with gaps in therapeutic support for children in care, it also means support to help children recover from early trauma is too limited.
29. Family time is based appropriately on the needs and wishes of children. Children are well supported to maintain relationships with key family members and to also build relationships with estranged family members at a pace that is comfortable for them.
30. Children were happy to talk to inspectors about the changes they have been able to bring about through their involvement with the Children in Care Council. Children are regularly represented at the corporate parenting board. Children proudly reported on the work they have done and how their feedback has changed services. They spoke enthusiastically about their involvement in changing how child in care reviews take place and creation of IRO profiles. They were also proud of their involvement in the creation of 'comfort kits', which are welcome packs for children who come into care. It was evident that their views have been listened to and acted on.
31. Social workers advocate and continue to provide support to children in custody. They work productively with young offender institutions and Youth Offending Services, being a strong voice focused on their welfare while in custody and ensuring suitable planning for their release into the community.
32. Timely strategy and professional meetings are held when concerns about children's safety and well-being increase. Support from the well-established exploitation service ensures that children in care who are experiencing exploitation receive a seamless supportive service.
33. There is a clear focus by children's carers and their social workers on finding out what children and young people enjoy. They are provided with support to take part in new opportunities and to help them to be ambitious for their futures. Children are actively supported by their carers to be involved in a wide range of activities.
34. The virtual school creates a supportive environment for children in care, supporting their attendance and attainment, helping them feel valued and recognised through initiatives such as awards ceremonies and praise cards, which boost self-esteem. The involvement of education advisers in personal education plan reviews offers much-needed consistency, particularly for pupils

who experience frequent social worker or placement changes. This continuity helps children feel secure and understood.

35. The health needs of children in care are fully supported, and children are routinely encouraged to attend optician, dental and other important medical appointments. While there remain delays in the arrangements for the scheduling of initial health assessments, social workers continue to request these assessments promptly. Review health assessments are held within timescale and provide a holistic review of children's emotional and mental health. Dedicated support for children's emotional health is limited, although some children access specialist emotional support via virtual school funding or on an individual basis funded by the local authority.
36. Many children live in stable homes with loving carers who are committed to look after them through to adulthood. Most children in long-term foster care have their long-term plans ratified in a timely way for children to be confident that they can remain with their carers. One child told an inspector: 'My foster carer has been amazing. She has taught me to become a child again, which means I now feel able to learn how to become an adult.'
37. Many children placed at a distance have their needs considered and addressed. They are regularly visited by their social workers, and their family contact is encouraged and supported. This includes homes for disabled children who live in well-matched 52-week settings in which their highly complex and extensive needs are comprehensively met.
38. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to develop their early permanence response. Some children are waiting far too long to be matched with permanent carers and adopters. This results in an increased number of placement moves and impacts on children's sense of belonging and security.
39. A small number of children in care have experienced drift and delay in the execution of their plans. The recently established permanence summits are gradually adding rigour to this process of monitoring, but this is not yet fully embedded to be impactful. Alternative plans for permanence, such as special guardianship orders, are not always actively explored with foster and kinship carers at key planning points. Delays persist even when carers state their wishes to secure special guardianship orders for children. Workforce challenges and instability in the children in care and fostering services have been instrumental in preventing work from progressing promptly.
40. A very small number of children in care subject to a deprivation of liberty order made by the high court under its inherent jurisdiction (DOL/IJ) are placed in unregistered children's homes. While these children were having their individual needs met, senior leadership oversight for children subject to DOLS/IJ and those living in unregistered settings is not always sufficiently robust. This means social work visits to these children are not always at a frequency proportionate to vulnerability.



41. The basic needs of separated migrant children are provided for. They are provided with safe accommodation, where their needs are assessed and addressed. The virtual school supports them to access education, and appropriate legal advice and support is provided to secure their immigration status. Although placement providers offer ongoing emotional support, it is not always clear from plans how mental health issues will be addressed. Leaders are targeting further workforce training to improve support for the emotional and mental health needs of separated migrant children.
42. Recent efforts to strengthen commissioning and sufficiency are having a positive impact. Most children live in or close to Southend. Work to reduce older children coming into care through targeted work with their families, alongside refreshed thresholds in the 'front door', is generating a gradual positive reduction in the numbers of children in care.
43. There is effective recruitment, assessment and training available for foster carers, kinship carers and adopters. Assessments are comprehensive, reflective and analytical, with carers and adopters contributing their own written narrative to inform the process. There is effective scrutiny by the fostering and adoption panel and the agency decision-maker to ensure that decisions are made in the best interests of children. There has been a high turnover of staff in the fostering services, and this has adversely impacted on the continuity of support for carers.

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

44. Recognising that some of their young people have had turbulent care journeys, personal advisers (PAs) provide responsive emotional and practical assistance to care leavers. Their investment in their care leavers is evident as they ensure new and continued opportunities are made available for them. This approach has been well received by care leavers who spoke to inspectors. They said that they felt that their PAs really cared for them and that these relationships went beyond a professional duty.
45. PAs use a variety of methods to keep in touch with their care leavers, considering individual care leavers' needs and wishes. Where care leavers aged 18 to 20 are not in touch, there is evidence of PAs and managers taking relevant steps in seeking to locate and re-engage with care leavers and offer them a service.
46. Although some care leavers have benefited from ongoing support, Southend's support services to most care leavers have, until recently, ceased on their 21st birthday. In the past few months, the service has taken steps to adopt a more positive and proactive approach to young people turning 21, making ongoing support an opt-out rather than opt-in service offer. The service has also actively sought ways to re-establish contact with all care leavers over the age of 21 years.

47. PAs take time to build relationships with vulnerable care leavers, often moving at a slow pace that is manageable for the young person but still focused on moving forward. Risk assessments are purposeful. Relevant actions are set to reduce and mitigate risk, ensuring that any emerging or present risks to care leavers are considered and relevant support is offered. Joint planning and work with adult and health services enables care leavers with complex needs, disability and higher support needs to have a tailor-made package of support in suitable accommodation in the community. Work with young parents and young people in custody is diligent, targeted and sensitive. The PA role adds additional oversight to packages of care and support and is an integral part of the professional network. PAs attend reviews and liaise with important family members to ensure all care leavers' needs are identified and catered for.
48. Care leavers are supported to access a wide range of social and recreational opportunities, helping them to engage and be included in their communities. They are encouraged and supported by their PAs to maintain relationships with family members, previous carers and those that are important to them.
49. Child and care leaver led initiatives and involvement in the improvements of services are evident. In addition to the development of the local offer, care leavers are actively involved in planning and the development of activities organised through the care leavers hub. Through hub meetings, care leavers have had opportunities to discuss issues directly with the director for children's services (DCS) and senior leaders.
50. Care leavers are provided with their health histories and key health records before they leave care. The health and emotional well-being of most care leavers is actively promoted by the leaving care service. Most care leavers are well supported to register for and access relevant universal services, ensuring that their health needs are met.
51. Young people are provided with the necessary documents they need as they move into adulthood. This includes identity documentation, such as passports or provisional driving licences.
52. The local offer to Southend's care leavers is published online. Young people told inspectors they are aware of their rights and entitlements. PAs also advise their care leavers of their entitlements and how to access services, and this information was evidenced in their pathway plans. Southend's local offer is evolving and meets basic statutory responsibilities, with some discretionary entitlements. However, the local offer is not equitable for all care leavers and there are notable differences in the offer to care leavers who live outside of Southend, who do not, for example, currently benefit from council tax exemption. Leaders throughout this inspection have attempted to resolve this issue and recognise that there is still more that needs to be done to strengthen the offer for these care leavers.

53. Care leavers are fully supported to be involved in key decisions about their futures. Pathway plans are co-produced with care leavers and address their personal circumstances, aligning them with their aspirations and their educational/employment ambitions. Plans have detailed and individualised goals, ensuring timely support for care leavers, for example in pursuing university or taking up employment opportunities. Pathway plans reflect active considerations of social and family networks and outline who their trusted adults are. There is also clear communication and collaboration between the virtual school, social workers and other professionals, which promotes a fully coordinated approach to meeting young people's needs.
54. There is a range of support to enable care leavers to pursue education and employment opportunities. This is supported by strong relationships with the virtual school, colleges and local businesses. Personalised career advice and access to practical opportunities, such as work placements and training, are offered to care leavers and are crucial for building their skills and confidence. Care leavers have been supported to successfully engage in sectors such as retail, horticulture and catering. Support is available to ensure that any barriers to education are minimised and that care leavers have what they need, such as financial support, accommodation and emotional support.
55. The authority's efforts to support care leavers who are not in education, employment or training are evident and are having a positive impact. Intervention strategies work to re-engage care leavers back into education or training. Additional support is provided for young people with additional educational needs. The local authority actively addresses their individual needs through tailor-made programmes and by working with colleges to facilitate access to additional funding. They have also been successful in establishing English for speakers of other languages courses, to better support care leavers from separated migrant backgrounds.
56. While care leavers are well prepared for leaving care by their allocated social worker, the allocation of a PA is not early enough to have established a trusting relationship when they transfer to the leaving care service at 18. Steps have been taken to address this more recently.
57. Care leavers have access to a range of accommodation options across Southend and beyond. Where appropriate, this includes the option for care leavers to remain with foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements. Established relationships with local social housing providers mean that most care leavers are provided with suitable accommodation. When young people need emergency housing, arrangements are made with housing to ensure they move to adult accommodation where there are staff on site to support them. The local authority is proactive in attempts to resolve care leavers' accommodation issues.

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

58. Since their appointment, the new chief executive officer and new lead member of children's services have both actively demonstrated their commitment to vulnerable children and their families in Southend. They make themselves visible to staff through walkabouts across the service and seek views directly from children and the workforce to ensure that as leaders they are directly aware of things that are important to both staff and children in their community.
59. Senior leaders within the council have ensured there is strong corporate support for children's services. Vulnerable children are held at the core of all council departments. The service's budget continues to be protected, and there are no pressures on the service to make additional savings targets. All departments across the council are mandatorily required to consider feedback from children and young people and families in their service planning. There is tangible evidence of the corporate support and joint working between children's services with adults, housing and human resources services.
60. Southend City Council has strong and active partnerships, not just within the council, but across the council between statutory, voluntary services, education providers and businesses. Services are committed to working together, taking seriously their role in making Southend a place for children and young people to thrive in. The evidence of this can be seen in the support provided to families through many of these wider services and Southend's employment and training offer to care leavers. Strategic leaders promote positive relationships with key safeguarding partners, including the health community, the police and education providers, and help to ensure that all work respectfully together. Partnership working across early help services demonstrates the effectiveness of strengthened relationships, with a clear agreed framework which supports effective joint working with children and families.
61. Leaders understand their local communities and have used this knowledge strategically and effectively to meet children's needs. Substantive changes to the front door services support children and their families to be directed to the most appropriate and least intrusive level of support.
62. Education partners speak positively about the improvements brought about through the recent changes over the past six to nine months, with better communication, praising timely responses and feedback. Cafcass and the designated family judge spoke positively about Southend's quality of social work practice and contributions to the work of family courts.
63. Southend's corporate parenting board has cross-party representation. It has recently revived its functioning, introduced champion roles for councillors to advocate and provide increased scrutiny and challenge at each meeting. While the board's engagement with children is evident, leaders recognise that there is

more work to do to demonstrate the effectiveness of the work of the board. This work includes strengthening the consistency of support to children in care and within the fostering services and to engage with care leavers up to the age of 25 years and to promote issues that are important to them.

64. Southend's local authority's self-evaluation of practice demonstrates that leaders are increasingly developing an accurate picture of their services' performance. Quality assurance and auditing activity are constantly being developed and enable leaders to have a sound understanding of the areas of practice which need development and to understand the impact of their work. Audit processes are strongly focused on learning and improvement, and actions are monitored to ensure effective follow-up.
65. The DCS and his leadership team are not complacent and know that they still have more to do. They are outward-focused and invite external advice and scrutiny from sector leaders. They have embraced the additional independent oversight from the improvement board chair and scrutineer and have used this support to strengthen their practices.
66. Practice overall has improved significantly since the last inspection, and some key systemic challenges around management, workforce and quality assurance have more recently been addressed effectively. Leaders were fully aware of the vast majority of areas identified for improvement during this inspection and already had plans in place to rectify them. Throughout the inspection, leaders have actively taken further steps to address shortfalls, for example pursuing political consent to ensure that care leavers who live outside of Southend City are not financially disadvantaged and to strengthen the offer of support to care leavers over 21 years.
67. The training and development offer in Southend is comprehensive and equips staff effectively to deliver their work with children and families. Staff speak positively about the weekly Keep in Touch meetings with the Director of Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support and the leadership team. They welcome the opportunities to be involved in change agendas and be kept updated with new developments.
68. Southend children's services are emerging from significant workforce challenges and changes at both management and practitioner levels. This has, at times, reduced the effectiveness of senior management oversight and the services' compliance with their procedures due to staff changes, which has been disruptive for both children and the workforce. There is evidence that the churn in the workforce is now stabilising, and this has resulted in most staff now having reduced and manageable workloads.
69. Supervision is increasingly taking place and is improving in its effectiveness. Practitioners report that they are fully supported by their managers, and with lower caseloads they now feel they have the capacity to develop meaningful relationships with children, families and care leavers and partner agencies.

70. Many workers have chosen to both live and work in Southend. They have seen positive cultural changes in the organisation and describe Southend as not just being a good place to live but now also a good place to work.

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