

Inspection of Dorset local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 17 March to 21 March 2025

Lead inspector: Sarah Canto, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in Dorset receive exceptional services that help meet their needs and reduce risks, supporting them to have better experiences and reach their potential. Since the previous inspection in 2021 when Dorset was judged to be good, senior leaders have continually and relentlessly strengthened and developed services for children. Ambitious, family focused and child-centred senior leaders, including political and corporate leaders alongside multi-agency partners, have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to children.

Leaders have a thorough understanding of the quality and impact of their services on families. These services are robustly analysed, reviewed and prioritised to determine how best to meet children's needs. The strong participation and involvement of children and families in shaping decisions about their own lives and service delivery is particularly striking. Dorset's 'family help' approach and its consistent response to families across the county, the wide range of services for families who have differing needs and effective multi-disciplinary help for children on child protection plans are all inspirational and strong features of this organisation.

What needs to improve?

- The clarity and detail of the care leaver offer, including for care leavers who are parents. (Outcome four, National Framework)

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

1. Children and families receive the help they need at the earliest point through wide-ranging prevention and early intervention services. Dorset's family help service's model of one continuous assessment means that children get the right help they need, at the right time, to help them make progress. Children and families benefit from consistent workers, which helps build trusting relationships.
2. Children referred to the Family Support and Advice Line, Dorset's front door, receive a timely and effective response. For the vast majority of children, decision-making is appropriate. Children's levels of need and risk are considered carefully to decide the right course of action. Social workers robustly analyse all risks, such as child exploitation, gang violence and domestic abuse. The need for parents to consent to referrals is well understood and consent is routinely sought, although overridden when necessary to ensure children's safety. Children and families benefit from the same effective response when concerns are raised during evenings and weekends.
3. Leaders have developed family help services with highly skilled practitioners who maintain a relationship with children and families as they move between different levels of need, such as targeted early help, children in need and child protection. This continuous support gives families the best opportunities to make progress.
4. Children's assessments are sensitively written, comprehensive and are informed by children and their parents' needs, the views of those agencies involved and the views and wishes of children and their families.
5. Lead practitioners visit children at a frequency they need. These visits are purposeful and well recorded, mostly written to the child and provide a clear record of why decisions were made, should a child wish to read their files in the future. Direct work with children is of a high quality, with practitioners delivering purposeful, planned work using a range of tools. Children's voices are listened to, and their wishes and feelings inform their plans.
6. Children who are at risk of coming into care, including those children who present as homeless and/or at risk of exploitation, are supported without delay by a range of skilled multi-disciplinary professionals, including skilled targeted youth workers, to reduce the risks to them. Dedicated and knowledgeable assistant team managers for contextual safeguarding use extensive planning for a wide variety of actions to help safeguard children.

7. When children are at risk of significant harm, strategy meetings are well attended by partner agencies. Effective information-sharing and analysis of risk lead to children receiving the right intervention and support.
8. When well-conducted single or joint-agency child protection investigations result in the need for a child protection conference, these are convened swiftly. Before the conference, independent reviewing officers, known as quality assurance reviewing officers (QARO), support parents to write child protection plans in partnership and to feel empowered through owning actions they are responsible for. Children are encouraged, and sometimes do, attend their conferences. Plans are mostly effective in addressing risk to improve children's lives, and progress is robustly evaluated by multi-agency line of sight meetings.
9. Despite the benefits of family constructed plans and conference reports, some assessments of children's needs at times are too long, which can make it difficult for parents to digest the information and not feel overwhelmed.
10. Social workers are sensitive to those parents who have learning needs and who may find plans and arrangements hard to understand. Therefore, social workers summarise core group meeting minutes and plans and help parents plan their diaries, so that parents can be as clear as possible about what the concerns are, what needs to change and who provides support.
11. Children's plans are actively progressed, reviewed and updated at well-attended core group meetings with families and professional partners. In addition to individual supervision of practitioners to track children's progress, multi-disciplinary group supervision encourages reflection on engagement and barriers that need to be overcome to reduce risks for the child and accelerate the action plan. These critical discussions are recorded and reflected well by business support staff. This enables the supervisor to purely focus on delivering high-quality and reflective supervision rather than administrative tasks. Therefore, full supervision records enable the reader to understand why and how decisions were made.
12. Support and availability of advocacy for children and parents is appropriately offered. Additionally, Dorset's multi-disciplinary team around the child and adults in the family provides effective help for families. Swift intervention from adult practitioners to tackle mental health concerns, alcohol and substance misuse and domestic abuse has a positive impact for children.
13. Disabled children are visited regularly by workers who get to know them and their families well, so that their needs can be addressed effectively. Workers are conscious of children's additional vulnerability and take steps to keep them safer, including the appropriate use of child protection procedures. Disabled children have access to advocacy so that their views are heard. The need for capacity assessments is considered early so that children are well prepared for their next steps. The introduction of the Birth to Settled Adulthood service, a

developing service to be embedded, helps children and young people to access help smoothly, well into their futures, which is not age dependent.

14. Pre-proceedings work as part of the Public Law Outline is timely. Extensive, high-quality multi-agency management oversight at weekly line of sight meetings ensures that children's progress and interventions are tracked effectively. Children either successfully move out of proceedings, or sufficient evidence is provided to enable the family court to make timely decisions that are in children's best interests. Recent investment in training for social workers has improved the quality and timeliness of pre-birth assessments, leading to better permanency plans being created for children.
15. Letters before proceedings sent to parents to advise them of concerns about their parenting are variable in quality. Some letters are not easy for families to understand and the language used is not always family friendly, with the potential to disempower already vulnerable parents. Managers have recognised these shortfalls and have taken steps to improve letters, by working in consultation with local families and the Family Rights Group as part of the 'reimagining pre-proceedings' project to develop a family friendly letter template.
16. Children living in private fostering arrangements are well supported. The assessment of the suitability of their arrangements is comprehensive and overseen by managers.
17. The local authority designated officer service in Dorset is effective and well managed. However, the lack of timely information and attendance at some meetings by the police has the potential to cause delay in understanding concerns about professionals who work with children and subsequent action needed.
18. Young carers are identified and their needs assessed so that they can receive support and enjoy activities outside of the home. Partners feel encouraged to refer young carers to well-organised services as well-developed community resources are evident and extensive.
19. For children missing from education, effective multi-agency arrangements are in place and prompt action is taken to support children's safety and for them to be reintegrated into education as soon as possible. Effective systems are also used to consider children who are electively home educated to ensure that suitability checks are completed, within the limits of what can be done under current statutory guidance.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

20. Children in care receive an outstanding service that results in their life experiences significantly improving. When children are at risk of coming into care, practitioners work closely and creatively with parents and extended family

members to prevent this happening whenever possible. Family group conferences and family network meetings are used routinely and well to identify those within the family network who may be able to provide care or support. Parents feel these meetings have helped galvanise their network of support so that they are not alone, helping extended family to understand concerns.

21. When children come into care, including those with complex needs and disabilities, their needs are well understood due to thorough social work assessments. Children's assessments inform comprehensive and clear care plans that have a good impact. As a result, most children live in stable, long-lasting homes that meet their needs and where they thrive. Children live with their brothers and sisters if this is right for them, with increased support if there is a risk of breakdown of arrangements.
22. When children live with their parents under a Care Order, effective arrangements are in place to ensure that children receive appropriate support and care. Children's views are listened to and any potential risks to them are monitored carefully. Line of sight management meetings ensure robust oversight and accountability of these arrangements.
23. Children are continually encouraged and supported to see their friends and family members, which helps them to retain a sense of belonging. Kinship carers are helped to include estranged parents in family activities, which helps children maintain their relationships within their own environment. This approach to children spending time with important people enables carers to feel more confident in applying for Special Guardianship Orders, so that children can leave care and benefit from long-term stability and security.
24. Managers have a clear focus on permanence being achieved as early as possible. This ethos is embraced by workers, who adhere to clear practice expectations. For most children, permanence plans progress in a timely way. For a small number of children, timescales are not always adhered to. These delays are understood and are being addressed.
25. Children are encouraged to attend their review meetings, and often do so, or they are supported by advocates or an independent visitor to provide their views. This involvement ensures that children are active participants in the care planning process. Children are supported at meetings by interpreters, although not all children receive important documents translated into their first language.
26. Children are supported by social workers who know them very well and who are aspirational for them. Regular visits take place to build meaningful and caring long-lasting relationships that make a difference.
27. Many children benefit from skilled and sensitive direct work. Life-story work is a feature of this direct work, and proposed plans for additional family workers within children in care teams will allow life-story work to be prioritised further.

28. Risks to children in care are identified and understood well. When children in care are at risk of exploitation or go missing, they receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response which provides an individualised wraparound service that is often successful in reducing risks. The use of independent workers, such as missing practitioners and targeted youth workers, ensures that most children receive timely return home interviews. The quality of the written records is variable, however, with weaker examples not creating a clear analysis of the risks of the incident, there is the potential of underutilising the information gathered.
29. Children in care are supported to avoid entering the criminal justice system. When in custody, children's needs are understood, promoted and addressed within their secure establishment.
30. Children's health needs are prioritised. They receive good support from a wide range of services to promote their physical and emotional well-being. Children are strongly supported to take advantage of activities and clubs in line with their hobbies and interests. These experiences enable children to enjoy new opportunities, friendships and wider social networks, and these are sometimes linked to children's long-term career aspirations.
31. Most children in care benefit from well-supported education placements. There is a relentless focus on children's well-being alongside their academic outcomes. Social workers and the virtual school team work together well to help children achieve and celebrate, reflecting a high degree of ambition for their futures.
32. Unaccompanied children who are looked after are found suitable homes without delay with carers who understand and meet their cultural needs. Children are assisted by interpreters at important meetings to ensure that they understand decisions and plans. Children are supported by workers who plan and prepare them well for the future and any uncertainties that may bring.
33. Unregistered children's homes are rarely used and only as a last resort. The decision-making protocol and senior leadership oversight are robust. More frequent visiting, alongside oversight from the QARO, ensures that children living in such homes are helped to be protected. Managers and commissioners work with providers so that they register accommodation. When this is not possible, alternatives are explored with urgency.
34. Special guardianship assessment reports are mainly thorough and detailed. This work, alongside support for special guardian families, is being integrated back within the local authority's own fostering service to improve and align services alongside kinship carers.
35. While the fostering service is going through change with ongoing plans to strengthen the service, the recruitment and retention of foster carers have been maintained. This stability is, in part, due to how well supported foster

carers feel. The growing fostering constellations for carers, including kinship carers, living in close proximity and emulating extended family support, are having a positive impact.

36. Early permanence is encouraged so that children make attachments with permanent carers as soon as possible. Equally, the local authority is ambitious to achieve adoption for brothers and sisters together, as well as older children, and consider long-term support plans. Active family finding by the regional adoption agency (Aspire), alongside working together with children's social workers, means that children have permanent homes with less delay. The working relationship between the local authority and the regional adoption agency is strong. This supports and improves the timeliness and outcomes for children placed for adoption.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

37. Care leavers in Dorset receive a strong service from ambitious personal advisers (PAs) and managers who know them well. PAs develop meaningful and trusting relationships with care leavers. They are passionate about making sure that care leavers get the help and care that they need.
38. PAs are dedicated and flexible, connecting with care leavers at the frequency that they need. The flexible and caring approach by PAs means that they are more successful in being in touch with care leavers who do not find it easy to accept or reach out for help. Care leavers readily turn to their PAs when they need support in times of crisis.
39. Care leavers benefit from getting to know their PA well before their social worker steps aside. This is positive for young people as they build relationships at a pace that is right for them, while receiving support from both their social worker and their PA concurrently. Care leavers over the age of 21 are encouraged to stay in touch and receive appropriate advice and support when they need it, until the time is right for them to step away from the service.
40. Care leavers' views are actively sought, helping to shape and develop the service through a range of forums and initiatives. Care leavers are supported to develop their confidence and to share their views. They attend their corporate parenting board and actively participate. Care leavers feel that they are listened to and have influence and that things change because of their views and experiences.
41. Pathway plans are meaningful, mostly written with the young person and are easy to understand. Plans capture care leavers' aspirations and help them prepare to achieve these. While care leavers are helped to understand their plans, not all care leavers are provided with a written copy in their first language so they can review their progress against their goals.

42. Care leavers are supported to be healthy and to understand their health needs. They have access to their medical information, and PAs are skilled at signposting care leavers to the health services so that they can access the help they need.
43. Care leavers are helped to live in a range of safe and suitable accommodation that meets their needs, with strong management oversight on rare occasions when this is not the case. The availability of appropriate accommodation for young people has significantly improved due to a forward-thinking approach and investment in additional properties. When care leavers find themselves in a housing crisis, the service responds quickly and effectively. There are a very small number of care leavers in custody. Support to these young people is effective, and early planning for their release is evident.
44. Almost all unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers live in accommodation with carers or support staff, who are attuned to their cultural needs and help them develop the life skills to live independently.
45. The introduction of a more inclusive app has made it easier for care leavers to access information about the care leavers' local offer. The offer does not provide care leavers or their PAs with enough detail or clarity in respect of their discretionary entitlements, such as specific services for emotional support or other help they may be able to have. Therefore, unless care leavers ask, they are vulnerable to becoming disadvantaged. PAs often have to be creative to get the services or support that care leavers need, such as driving lessons or compensating for a lack of council tax exemption for those living away from Dorset. However, on an individual basis, care leavers are responded to thoughtfully, for example so that they have access to transport and equipment to work. Effective partnership working with the Department for Work and Pensions and the virtual school maximises the potential of the help available.
46. PAs know care leavers' children well and offer practical and emotional support to new parents, helping them with essential tasks and accompanying them to important meetings with their child. This support provides care leavers with increased confidence and helps improve their parenting skills. Care leavers who are parents are given support to recognise unhealthy or abusive relationships that would impact on their ability to care for their child, and take steps to reduce this risk. However, the offer for care leavers who are parents is mostly limited to universal services. The information in the offer does not reflect the local authority's high aspirations to parents as a corporate parent/grandparent. While Dorset has recognised care experience as a protected characteristic, the increased vulnerabilities of care leavers who are pregnant or who are parents are not sufficiently considered strategically.
47. PAs have a strong focus on helping their care leavers to be safe. Care leavers take up offers of support with areas of their life they find difficult, including relationships, drug and alcohol misuse and unhealthy lifestyles.

48. An increasing number of care leavers are involved in education, training and work. A variety of initiatives, through partnership working, reflect the importance placed on care leavers being able to access meaningful work and education opportunities. Examples such as work coaches and the care leaver hub's pre-employment course have considerable success. Care leavers are well supported to attend university, helping them to achieve their life ambitions.
49. The Staying Close project is very effective in helping a growing number of young people to feel cared for and connected to their original carers or important people in their lives. Care leavers are, therefore, helped to feel less isolated, particularly those young people who have few people around them for support.

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

50. Children continue to be placed at the heart of Dorset local authority. The child-centred director of children's services (DCS), alongside their predecessor, senior leaders and political members, leads by example, heralding a learning organisation that has effective and accountable relationships with each other and its partners. Strong collaborative working is evident from how partnership challenges are approached, from operational service delivery through to strategic and multi-agency decision-making. The meaningful involvement of children and young people, who co-chair and participate in the corporate parenting board, ensures that the things that matter most to children are fundamental to the agenda. A young person recently bravely presented to the board a piece they had written, 'More than just a number', to help members understand what it is like to be in care with powerful impact.
51. Dorset has been selected by the Department for Education as a 'wave one' Pathfinder to test and learn from the government's proposals for reforms. These areas include family help, multi-agency child protection arrangements, family networks and education as an equal safeguarding partner. In all of these pillars, effective social care practice has been evident, while statutory duties continue to be fulfilled. Thinking 'Family First' has empowered families and enabled them to have ownership of their plans to support improvement in their lives. Effective line of sight meetings bring about secure multi-agency decision-making and have become an integral part of practice. Of particular note is the careful introduction of single-family help assessments implemented by skilled practitioners.
52. Family help locality-based services are successful in achieving consistency across the county. This way of working means that families receive a continual service by the same practitioners until it is no longer needed, while families become linked into community early intervention and prevention services as part of Dorset's Strategic Alliance plan. Easy access to high-quality, universal and universal plus provision is seen as crucial. The local authority's emphasis on all children thriving is linked into place-based arrangements, alongside the

growing expansion of family hubs. When families no longer require children's services intervention, they are helped to engage in activities and positively connect with groups in their community, often supported by strengthened kinship networks.

53. The areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection and focused visit have been tackled well. Twenty-one new homes for care leavers have been created, with increased oversight of care leavers' accommodation. The quality and timeliness of supervision in the care leaver services have substantially improved.
54. Nearly all of the very few areas identified for further strengthening during this inspection are recognised and being addressed through the local authority's accurate self-evaluation. These include management oversight and performance in the fostering service, the need to increase family worker capacity in children in care teams and the quality of pre-proceedings letters. Additionally, senior leaders have recognised, and are working to resolve, the impact personally and professionally on social workers in the child protection teams who have caseloads with greater intensity and pressure. Senior leaders are conscious of more children in care living outside of the authority and seek to rectify the inequality and disadvantage this brings for their children, who become care leavers, who cannot claim council tax redemption.
55. Senior leaders have a robust understanding of how practice and overall performance impact on children and families through a wealth of management information and sophisticated performance reporting mechanisms, alongside feedback from children and families. This knowledge is deepened and understood from a multi-agency perspective, with health, education and police partners drilling down to children's experiences at an individual level through strategic and operational boards. In addition to the significant governance and oversight that the Pathfinder partnership programme brings, the local authority has a strong learning culture and invites external scrutiny to improve services.
56. The local authority's performance management framework is strong and follows Dorset's integral theme of putting families first, which is seen in the requirement for auditors to actively seek families' and young people's views first to set the direction of auditing activity. A significant amount of auditing, based on intelligence gathered, is carried out to help inform senior managers' line of sight to practice. This approach ensures that a range of practice is reviewed so that learning is identified and shared to improve practice. Opportunities for learning and audit themes are shared with managers and staff regularly, whether this is the quarterly conferences, practice weeks, takeover days, newsletters and management discussions.
57. Senior leaders make sure they have a high level of attention and oversight of children that they are worried about the most. The DCS' 'need to know' policy ensures that incidents of concern are not overlooked, alongside other effective mechanisms for management oversight of vulnerable children and care leavers,

including the very small number of those who live in unsuitable accommodation.

58. Children in Dorset's care are greatly encouraged to have fulfilling and rewarding futures. Leaders and managers work well with other organisations to successfully increase employment opportunities, in addition to the 10 apprentices working within the council. The staying close initiative has succeeded in supporting care leavers not to feel isolated and making sure that important people stay in touch with them.
59. Practitioners have been resolute in universally saying that they feel supported, valued and receive regular and helpful individual and group supervision. They feel equipped with a wealth of resources and training, such as motivational interviewing, to enable them to carry out their roles effectively. Family workers can now progress through career progression levels, recognising their competency and skill when working within the family help service. Practitioners and managers have embraced the organisation's changes in relation to service delivery and value line of sight of meetings, which increase the clarity and ownership of decision-making. Practitioners' relentless dedication to ensure that children, families and care leavers receive the support they need shone through in this inspection.



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