Inspection of Gloucestershire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 9 to 20 June 2025

Lead inspector: Sophie Wales, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection in 2022, when services were judged to require improvement, credible leaders, with strong corporate and political support, have been relentless in their ambition to improve children's lives. With a robust focus on creating the conditions for success, services are now judged to be good overall.

Under the current director of children's services, who took up post two years ago, the pace of improvement has accelerated. She has modelled a positive relationship approach by providing strong and empathetic leadership and empowering her wider management team to create purposeful, child-centred practice.

Leaders have ensured a direct line of sight into practice and know their services well. They have used this knowledge to improve the quality of practice in all areas, supported by an increasingly stable and secure workforce. The recent remodelling of services means children benefit from the secure relationships that they are able to develop with their social workers.

Relational practice is a particular strength in Gloucestershire and shines through in the work that is completed with children, parents and carers, and partner agencies.

This has led to a tangible step change, where risk is managed more confidently as a result of stronger relationships. Leaders place a high value on co-production and services are more effective because of this. The local authority's Ambassadors are a genuine asset to the service. They provide insight and support and hold leaders to account for decisions made.

Children needing help and protection receive consistently well delivered services, though more needs to be done to strengthen the offer to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Children in care experience exceptional care and support. Care leavers are generally well supported, though this could be improved by providing more assistance to help them into employment, education or training. What needs to improve?

What Needs to Improve

- The response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. (outcome 1: national framework)
- Support for care leavers not in employment, education or training. (outcome 4, national framework)

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

1. Children and their families benefit from high-quality, effective early help services. High-quality assessments result in clear plans. Assessments fully explore the individual needs of children and their parents. Practitioners take time to understand families' histories, which results in clear analysis and understanding of children's circumstances. Children's experiences are better as a result.

2. When children are first referred to Gloucestershire's 'front door', managers make child-centred decisions about what needs to be done. These are clearly recorded and set out why the threshold is met. Parental consent is understood and well regarded and only dispensed with if it is in the child's best interests. Consent is revisited with families. Social workers are persistent and curious to understand children's experiences. When contacts and referrals need an immediate safeguarding response, these are processed quickly.

3. Management direction on contact and referrals is well recorded; this means workers are clear about what action they need to take to safeguard children. Practice in the front door is sensitive to parental history; interim safety and contingency plans are clearly recorded and appropriately assigned across agencies. There is some delay for non-urgent contacts requiring multi-agency safeguarding information. Managers track and monitor the timeliness of these effectively.

4. Assessments, including those for disabled children, are thorough and relationship based. Social workers take time to explore children's culture and identity. They use effective direct work with children to inform the assessment analysis and plan. Social workers engage families with empathy and clarity. This helps to build trusting relationships with families with children held at the centre of practice. Exceptionally thorough pre-birth assessments are a particular strength. These inform confident and sensible planning from birth. They consider discharge arrangements from hospital and competently assess parental capacity to change.

5. Strategy meetings are well attended by the right professionals. Detailed information is shared between agencies, which results in proportionate and timely enquiries if this is needed. Social workers confidently balance concerns with protective factors. Management oversight is clear, with rationale and follow-up actions well documented. Managers adopt a child-centred and relational approach, meaning child protection enquiries are not entered into lightly.

6. Leaders have been successful in their efforts to tackle long-term neglect through decisive decision-making informed through a range of evidence-based tools. These are used with parents to help them understand why there may be concerns or worries and detailed plans are tightly monitored for progress.

7. Plans for children in need and child protection are co-produced with families and focus on both safeguarding and helping parents to understand the impact of their circumstances. Plans are specific about risks and what families need to do to keep children safe. Management oversight is evident when child protection plans end. While the numbers of repeat child protection plans are high, this is linked to past poor practice. Current work is much improved and shows clearer direction and oversight. There is clear child protection chair footprint and oversight on children's records.

8. Child in need meetings do not always take place promptly after children's cases step down from child protection. This was mostly due to wider family availability to attend these meetings but means managers did not always have an overview of the progress children were making. Leaders took immediate action to tighten this process on hearing this inspection finding.

9. Where children do not make expected progress or concerns are high, pre-proceedings are initiated appropriately. Leaders retain tight oversight of the progress of these children. As a result of the right families being worked with at the right time, fewer children are entering legal processes. When pre-proceedings are initiated, social workers engage parents sensitively to ensure they understand concerns. Bespoke and purposeful contingency plans are written in clear, accessible language.

10. When children are at risk of entering care or to support their reunification home, effective direct work and evidenced-based interventions are completed with

parents. This means more children are able to remain living in family settings and within their local communities.

11. The joint housing and local authority response to homelessness among 16- and 17-year-olds lacks consistency. Despite swift action being taken at the front door, there is sometimes a subsequent lack of joined-up practice with housing. This can lead to a delay and uncertainty for some children in being offered suitable alternative accommodation while an assessment considers suitable options. Children are not always provided with sufficient guidance and independent advocacy to make an informed choice about their options.
12. The identification of children in caring roles has recently strengthened. As a result, more children are now supported in their caring roles. Social workers support those needing more targeted support. Many of these developments are new, and it is still too early to measure long-term impact.

13. Private fostering arrangements are identified appropriately and well managed, with oversight by senior leaders who recognise the potential vulnerability of children in these arrangements. The response to children in these situations is timely and sensitive to the individual needs of the child and their situation. Assessments of arrangements are thorough, with ongoing support focused on the child's needs.

14. Children at risk of exploitation in Gloucestershire receive a coordinated and proportionate safeguarding response, with effective multi-agency planning and comprehensive management oversight. Exploitation screening tools are widely used to identify and understand risk and detailed, well-written plans are in place and used effectively by partner agencies. Practitioners use tailored, need-based interventions to support children who go missing. Daily multi-agency review meetings oversee the effectiveness of these to check children's progress and escalate concerns when needed. Workers are appropriately curious about children's circumstances and spend time creating purposeful relationships with them, which helps children to talk more openly about their experiences.

15. Leaders have oversight on children who are missing education and exhaust all routes to locate children. This reduces risk for children. Safeguarding for children missing from education is prompt, with reintegration well supported.

16. When children require an emergency out-of-hours service, they receive an effective and responsive service. The service considers children's records and histories to inform decisions and provide advice. Visits are conducted to ensure children are protected. Police and health services actively engage in strategy meetings, which take place out of hours. Appropriate decisions are made and communicated to day services for follow-up.

17. The local authority designated officer (LADO) allegation management process provides a timely and coordinated safeguarding response to the oversight and management of allegations against adults who work with children. LADOs raise

awareness and provide safeguarding practice advice to a wide range of partner agencies.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

18. Children enter care at the right time and live in stable homes where they are well supported, and their needs are met. Leaders take pre-emptive, timely action to keep children safe when this is needed. Feedback from the family judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is very positive. Children tell their carers and their social workers that they feel well cared for.

19. Family and kinship options are explored early, and thorough assessments and robust planning ensure carers are well prepared and receive tailored support that reflects the unique needs of each child, promoting stability and continuity. For children living at home on care orders, this is in their best interests. Arrangements are reviewed through detailed assessments, though these are not always completed within an agreed timescale.

20. Exceptionally strong relationships are a consistent feature for children in care. Many children have long, trusting relationships with their social workers. Family support workers and social workers visit as often as needed and deliver bespoke, creative direct work to help children process trauma and make progress in their lives. Manageable caseloads enable practitioners to focus on what matters most: building relationships that help children feel seen, heard and valued.

21. Detailed assessments are informed by direct work which captures children's wishes and feelings. Care planning is thorough and child centred. Plans are written in language children can understand and reflect their individual needs and aspirations. Permanence is considered early and revisited regularly, with clear contingencies in place and matching prioritised. As a result, most children know their plans and experience a sense of belonging and security. Where permanence is achieved through adoption, special guardianship or reunification with family, these transitions are underpinned by high-quality planning and oversight.

22. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide rigorous oversight, championing children's voices and robustly escalating concerns if needed. The IRO footprint and impact are highly visible, and many children benefit from warm, established relationships with them.

23. Practitioners help children make sense of their histories through engaging, age-appropriate work that supports emotional literacy and strengthens personal relationships. For children moving towards adoption, life-story materials are comprehensive and sensitively crafted, with birth families contributing to preserve children's heritage and identity.

24. Family time is promoted with sensitivity and flexibility, enabling children to sustain important relationships with people who matter to them. Whether through

overnight stays, sibling contact or virtual connections, arrangements are shaped around children's needs and wishes.

25. Transitions are managed with care and sensitivity, ensuring children maintain links with those who matter most. Children are encouraged to keep in touch with former carers, including previous key workers, friends and families from former homes.

26. Children's health needs are met through proactive, well-coordinated support. Social workers work closely with health professionals to ensure timely access to physical and emotional health services. Children have timely access to dental care and health assessments, and emotional well-being is prioritised through effective use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires by social workers and independent reviewing officers.

27. The virtual school provides aspirational, responsive support for children. The quality and oversight of personal education plans have been strengthened since the last inspection and are now of a consistently high quality. Children are encouraged not only to succeed academically but to pursue their interests and talents. Children placed out of area are swiftly supported to access suitable education. Children's achievements are celebrated, and appropriate plans are put in place to ensure children can learn effectively alongside their peers and develop their talents and interests.

28. Residential care is used purposefully. Careful planning has systematically supported an increasing number of children to live in stable homes. This means children are able to live in communities that are familiar to them and nearer wider family when it is safe for them to do so. This is supported by highly effective carer recruitment, the support for carers and purposeful commissioning. There is recognition that more needs to be done, particularly for adolescents who experience stress and uncertainty when long-term placements are not available. Where disruption occurs, practitioners act swiftly to stabilise or sensitively plan transitions, helping children make sense of placement moves.

29. Children at risk of harm receive swift and effective responses. Those who go missing or are vulnerable to exploitation benefit from robust, multi-agency support. Their voices are central to safety planning, and effective use of My Safety Meetings and multi-agency child exploitation meetings helps to reduce risk and provide strategic oversight for leaders.

30. The use of unregistered children's homes has significantly reduced. When children are placed in unregistered provision, increased visiting and enhanced oversight by senior leaders helps reduce vulnerability and risk. Senior leaders are fully sighted on these arrangements, which are only used if required as short-term bridging arrangements while registered provision is sought.

31. Disabled children in care receive highly personalised, thoughtful support that promotes communication and emotional well-being. Transitions to adult services are well planned, with early involvement from personal advisers (PAs) and adult social care.

32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are very well supported. Social workers are skilled and culturally sensitive, ensuring that children feel safe, valued and hopeful about their futures. Accommodation is appropriate, and children are supported to access healthcare, education and legal advice.

33. Foster carers feel well supported and appreciated by the service. Leaders and managers are appropriately ambitious to improve the service further. Recruitment and retention of carers has been a particular area of success for the service and has led to a net increase in foster carers and foster placements.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

34. Most care leavers in Gloucestershire benefit from reliable and responsive support. Care leavers enjoy positive relationships with their personal advisers (PAs) with whom they build purposeful, respectful relationships. PAs take time to get to know young people at their pace, with persistence and sensitivity. Care leavers reach out to PAs for comfort and support at times of crisis.

35. Transitions to the care leaver service are well planned. Social workers ensure children have the essential documents for adult life, such as bank accounts, provisional driving licences, passports and health passports, in place. Young people are provided with a transition plan, which is a clear, simple, well-laid-out explanation on a page about who will be responsible for what as they approach 18.

36. Joint visits with social workers ensure continuity and allow PAs to build relationships before young people enter the care leaving service at 18 years old. Care leavers are supported to develop independence skills through targeted programmes for both under-18 and 18-plus care leavers.

37. Visits and contacts with care leavers are regular and responsive to need. PAs use a wide variety of ways to communicate, including phone calls, texts, instant messaging and emails. PAs' records are warmly written. PAs are persistent in their communication with young people; this includes thoughtful birthday and holiday messages as well as links to resources and messages of encouragement, helping care leavers feel valued and considered. When young people live or move out of area, they continue to receive timely support and visits from their PAs.

38. Co-produced pathway plans are timely, detailed and tailored to care leavers' individual needs, interests and ambitions. PAs use a range of tools to engage young people in producing their plan, including visually represented assessments, which provides a representation of goals set and outcomes achieved. Pathway

plans for older care leavers are of high quality, up to date, and personalised to their individual needs and circumstances.

39. Care leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements. The local offer is comprehensive and co-produced with care leavers, with their involvement in its design and content. The Local Offer Care app provides clear, well-set-out information. PAs talk to young people about their entitlement, and this is mostly reflected in their pathway plans. Support with entering university, to gain housing and to access essential documents is reflected in care leavers' pathway plans.

40. Care leavers' health needs are routinely considered, with support in place to help young people access and engage with health professionals. The impact of early trauma for some care leavers is acknowledged and understood. Care leavers with emotional and mental health needs receive increased visits and practical support to attend counselling or to access specialist services.

41. Care leavers are supported by their PAs to access hospital appointments and medication and are supported during ill health. Most pathway plans reference care leavers' health passports.

42. PAs provide consistent support for care leavers when they go through difficult times and are persistent even when care leavers disengage. PAs understand the impact of early trauma and past experiences and remain available for young people to reach out to. Multi-agency My Safety Meetings, chaired by child protection conference chairs, oversee reviews where there are particular concerns for vulnerable care leavers.

43. Additional support is given to vulnerable care leavers. Care leavers who are parents receive ongoing, tailored support from the leaving care service. Care leavers in custody receive regular contact, financial support and advocacy, with education and employment encouraged. While in custody, care leavers are supported with education where they want this, and to maintain contact with wider family networks.

44. For care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET), plans to address this situation have not had sufficient impact. Leaders understand the barriers that young people face. However, effective support to help them overcome this is not gaining sufficient traction. The virtual school supports care leavers up to the age of 18 with a comprehensive local offer, but do not remain involved beyond this.

45. When young people are in education, employment and training, more detailed pathway plans are ambitious and clearly set out the help needed. All care leavers have access to laptops and broadband to support digital access.

46.. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. 'Staying put' arrangements are planned early, and there are a range of supported

living options and a crash pad for crisis situations. A small number of care leavers have experienced unsuitable arrangements, including the temporary use of bed and breakfast and hotel accommodation. When this is the case, PAs are tenacious in supporting young people to secure more suitable accommodation.

47. There is unrelenting support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. PAs are matched to young people, promoting important relationships. PAs are responsive and sensitive to their cultural needs. When young people arrive in the UK, care planning to welcome and support them is timely, and suitable accommodation is provided regardless of immigration status.

48. Decisions to end support post-21 are made collaboratively with care leavers, and those wanting continued support receive it. PAs respect care leavers' personal choices. There is no pressure to end care leavers' engagement with the service prematurely and returning care leavers are welcomed back and are often linked back to PAs who know them.

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

49. Highly effective leaders have a clear and ambitious vision for children's services. With an accelerated pace, they have systematically created the conditions for success. As a result, social work practice is now strong in most areas and the experiences and progress of vulnerable children are much improved.

50. Consistent political and corporate support has helped enable Gloucestershire's improvement journey. Political and corporate leaders are firmly committed to improving the lives of Gloucestershire's most vulnerable children and have invested heavily and wisely to support the improvement journey. They are well briefed and well informed, which enables them to hold the director of children's service and her leadership team to account.

51. Leaders have sharpened oversight and decision-making for children. Leaders and managers understand thresholds and risk is managed effectively. Children who receive support receive it at the right time and from the right people. There is highly effective IRO oversight and challenge.

52. Highly effective commissioning arrangements and determined social work practice have led to both a significant reduction in children in residential settings and overall numbers of children in care. Leaders have been strategic and insightful in their forward planning. Increasingly, children have been brought back to live in county, placed nearer to home and back into communities they are familiar with. Leaders have achieved this through careful reshaping of the market and creative engagement with local providers.

53. Relationships with partner agencies are mature and well functioning. This has created a positive partnership environment for local practitioners and helped to

resolve difficulties. Shared priorities have meant increased collective investment in services for children.

54. Leaders have ensured effective quality assurance processes to oversee and monitor the progress of children. There is tight oversight of performance and practice. This ensures leaders have an accurate self-assessment of the service. Leaders have systematically embedded an ethos where learning from practice through effective quality assurance and investment is delivering skilled, well-trained staff who practise safely. The Social Work Academy is a real strength, providing workers with their development as a direct result of learning from practice.

55. Leaders have set out a clear vision for delivering success for children, by modelling values and creating a culture where the workforce, children and families feel valued and heard; risk is managed confidently with bottom lines clearly set out. Investment in the workforce and well-thought-out structures mean most children directly benefit from continuity of worker. Investment in frontline managers is leading to strengthened and purposeful oversight and case direction; delay is reduced and work with families is effective. Incremental changes have seen a stabilising and development of the workforce, and the embedding of end-to-end relationship-based practice using language that cares. This leads to relationships which are trusting and enabling.

56. Well-delivered supervision and manageable caseloads are leading to purposeful social work practice. The quality of supervision has significantly improved since the last inspection and is now a strength. Management oversight and direction are consistently evident across most children's records. This influences practice, which strengthens as a result.

57. The members of the leadership team are excellent corporate parents for children in care and care leavers. Children told inspectors that they felt listened to and valued. Leaders recognise and celebrate the achievements of children in care. Care Leavers Week is recognised as a key celebration event in the year.

58. There is a comprehensive model of participation and engagement. Leaders place high value on the voices of children, young people and parents, which are used effectively to shape services and influence thinking. Ambassadors are a successful vehicle for change. Ambassadors meet with leaders regularly and deliver a mentoring scheme for directors and senior leaders.

59. Social workers enjoy working in Gloucestershire. Many have worked in the local authority for a long time and are committed to both the work and the area. Senior leaders are described as visible, approachable and suitably challenging.

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