Inspection of Sefton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 June to 4 July 2025

Lead inspector: Lisa Walsh, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children and families in Sefton have significantly improved since the 2022 inspection, when overall effectiveness was judged to be inadequate. Most children now receive services that are making a positive difference to their progress and experiences, helping to keep them safer and well cared for. There are still inconsistencies in the response to neglect, leading to delay in the progression of planning for some children, which affects their outcomes.

Children are now a clear priority for the wider council. The leadership team's focus on recruitment, retention and managing caseloads has stabilised the workforce and improved practice quality. Staff report a positive shift in organisational culture. More recently, leaders have taken a steady, persistent approach to improvement, using external and independent scrutiny effectively. A robust quality assurance framework provides leaders with a clear understanding of service effectiveness. Leaders have a clear understanding of what further improvements are needed and have firm plans in place.

What needs to improve?[1]

- The effectiveness of management oversight and challenge in response to neglect. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The consistency of use of multi-agency information to inform the safeguarding response when a risk of significant harm is identified. (outcome 3, national framework)
- The quality of letters to parents before proceedings. (outcome 1, national framework)
- The quality of disabled children's records to enable an understanding of their experiences. (principle 2, national framework)
- The embedding of the new complaints process to ensure full engagement with parents and carers. (principle 3, national framework)

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children have access to a wide range of timely and effective early help services, supporting them to receive help that is proportionate to their needs. There is a clear interface between early help and statutory social work. Families' cases are stepped up to statutory services or stepped down to universal services appropriately and, as a result, children receive the right help at the right time.

2. Early help assessments are proportionate and completed within the child's expected timescales. Assessments and plans are co-produced with families, clearly identifying strengths and areas of concern and the support needed to help families.

3. Most contacts to the children's help and advice team (CHAT) are made promptly by referrers. However, a small number of children experience delay in police referrals when there have been incidents of domestic abuse. Leaders and managers monitor this carefully, and escalations are made in response to individual cases of delay.

4. The introduction of conversations as a way of accepting referrals is helping contact officers and social workers to identify the most critical issues for children and families. For a small number of children, referrers do not refer to or consider children's social care thresholds for involvement and do not clearly identify what it is they are requesting from children's social care. This means that for some

[1] The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the Children's Social Care: National Framework. This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

children they do not receive the support that they need at the earliest opportunity.

5. Timely information-gathering and analysis, alongside clear management direction, ensures that appropriate action is taken to protect children at risk of harm. For most children there is no delay between a contact being received and social work triage taking place. Management oversight is clearly recorded and prompts social workers to consider using appropriate screening tools.

6. Social workers in the CHAT are child focused and consider children's social care history and partner agency information when making their recommendations. There is an appropriate emphasis on contacting parents in the triage and screening process. The child's voice is considered, including sometimes through collaboration with schools.

7. For most children, social work analysis and assessment of risk is robust. Social workers are professionally curious. They consider the child's and family's needs, and any new information gathered during the screening process. Appropriate next steps are recommended.

8. For a small number of children who experience multiple contacts into the CHAT, their needs are not met at the earliest opportunity. Some referrals evidence that there has been recent intervention which has not been effective. For these children, decision-making is adult focused without the necessary exploration of the child's experiences and the potential impact of harm. There is an over-optimism regarding planning for safety and family history is not well understood as an indicator of future potential harm.

9. The emergency duty team (EDT) is a responsive service. Appropriate contacts to EDT demonstrate an understanding of the service and its purpose. History is routinely considered to develop an understanding of risk and to aid the development of immediate safety plans. The service responds appropriately to urgent issues.

10. Strategy meetings for most children are timely and well attended and lead to effective multi-agency planning. When risk of immediate harm is identified, for a small number of children, visits take place before strategy meetings without the benefit of full information and a coordinated response from professionals. This means that there are delays in the sharing of important information before action is taken to consider children's safety.

11. Social work visiting takes place promptly and regularly, ensuring that children are seen and immediate safety plans are put in place where needed. Where children cannot return to the care of their parents, pending further enquiries, there is consideration and immediate assessment of kinship networks so that children can remain within their families when it is appropriate for them to do so.

12. Social workers take time to get to know children and how they present in different situations, including at home and school. Children benefit from skilled direct work to help them make sense of their experiences and inform subsequent planning. For some disabled children, records do not capture the child's voice well and are not written to the child. This does not support an understanding of children's experiences.

13. Child protection enquiries are detailed, involving direct work with children to ensure their voices are heard. Decisions to progress to initial child protection conferences are appropriate, and conferences are well attended with effective decision-making.

14. Assessments of children's needs are undertaken promptly, with no delays in allocation or initial visits. Social workers build relationships quickly, conducting thorough assessments that consider family histories, risk and cultural factors. Support and intervention take place during the assessment, which means that families do not wait for the help that they need.

15. Child in need and child protection plans are mostly specific, timebound and outcome focused, with clear contingency plans. Plans are reviewed regularly through core groups and child in need meetings, ensuring responsiveness to children's changing needs. Child protection conferences are well attended by partner agencies, who contribute to effective decision-making.

16. The specialist team around the baby service provides parents with intensive support which gives them opportunities to evidence that that they can care safely for their children. There is a determined focus on children remaining with their families when it is safe for them to do so. Assessments completed within the team around the baby are suitably detailed. They use a wealth of multi-agency information to inform evaluation of risk and next steps. Families who work with this service benefit from strong, effective multi-agency working.

17. For children experiencing neglect, practice does not always fully consider cumulative harm. For some children, this has led to repeated cycles of concern without decisive safeguarding action being taken to reduce risk. Management oversight and challenge by child protection conference chairs (the local authority call these independent reviewing officers (IROs)) is not consistently leading to children being protected effectively.

18. Children and families benefit from a strong and impactful multi-agency response when domestic abuse is a feature in their lives. This is leading to sustainable progress and for children to be safer.

19. For most children, when they are not being safeguarded effectively by a child protection plan and concerns are escalating, they are appropriately considered at a legal gateway meeting in a timely manner. The quality of information presented

at legal gateway meetings is too variable. For some children, reports do not contain the information needed by the panel to support timely decision-making.

20. When decisions are made to enter the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline, letters before proceedings are promptly completed by social workers. There is inconsistency in the quality of letters before proceedings. Some do not succinctly set out for parents what the concerns are and what they need to do. When children are in pre-proceedings, social workers complete thorough, timely assessments. A range of help is provided and planning is put in place. For some children, this improves their circumstances, and they step back down from this process with positive progress achieved. For other children, plans of support and assessment do not progress or improve children's outcomes effectively and they remain in pre-proceedings for too long and experience delay. Oversight of children in pre-proceedings has been strengthened, and this is starting to have an impact. However, a small number of these children remain in pre-proceedings, resulting in delay.

21. Social workers in Sefton are alert to and can identify effectively when children are at risk of exploitation. Specialist workers work alongside social workers and build meaningful relationships with children at risk of exploitation, developing detailed plans in consultation with them. Interventions and direct work with children and families supports the reduction of risks, and the use of screening tools is helping workers to evaluate children's progress. Return home interviews for missing children are timely, with push-and-pull factors being explored to inform future planning.

22. Children at risk of homelessness receive a prompt, child-centred response, with comprehensive assessments capturing the child's voice. Workers are persistent in building relationships, ensuring timely safeguarding and planning for permanent accommodation.

23. A comprehensive offer of support is available to children and young people who are carers. Leaders have rightly identified that there is more to do to improve the accuracy of records for these children to fully understand the impact of the intervention on children's lives.

24. Children living in private fostering arrangements receive a timely and robust response. Detailed assessments ensure these arrangements meet children's needs and keep them safe. There is effective management oversight of private fostering arrangements.

25. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service provides a thorough response when there are allegations made against adults working with children. Allegations against professionals are swiftly and robustly managed.

26. The local authority has robust procedures in place for children whose parents have chosen to educate them at home. Leaders take swift action to support

children to return to school. Similarly, they respond promptly to find the whereabouts of children who do not attend school when they should.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

27. Decisions to bring children into care are mostly appropriate and are made in their best interests, with effective decision-making and scrutiny by senior managers. Consideration is given before children's removal about whether they can safely remain living in their family network. Most children are supported to live in settled and stable homes, where their carers understand and meet their needs well. When children come into care, they live with their brothers and sisters whenever possible. Most children who are placed outside of Sefton live in safe and stable homes that meet their needs well. They make good progress.

28. Social workers know their children well. They build trusting, compassionate relationships, taking the time to understand each child's journey into care. Most children benefit from stable and positive relationships with their social workers and IROs. Children are visited regularly in line with their needs, with visits increasing if risks escalate. Visits are recorded sensitively. Life-story work is valued, and significant moments are captured to help children understand their histories. Family time is safe and well planned and reflects children's wishes.

29. When children live in settled homes, visit frequency often reduces appropriately in line with their wishes, balanced with the need to ensure safety and well-being.

30. Most cared for children have their needs reassessed at least annually and more frequently if their circumstances have changed. These assessments are comprehensive and inform care planning.

31. Most children are actively contributing to their plans and reviews. Children's needs are well understood and reviewed regularly, informing effective care planning. Cared for children reviews are timely and well attended, with IROs seeking children's views, providing clear outcomes and adding scrutiny through mid-point reviews. This is holding professionals to account and reducing drift. IROs provide children with clear, sensitively written outcomes, explaining the decisions reached.

32. Most children in Sefton benefit from living in secure and permanent homes. Social workers consider permanence from the outset and are tenacious in pursuing this when possible. Senior leaders have developed effective processes and systems to monitor permanence planning for children. Close monitoring, through regular care planning and permanence planning meetings, means that plans to progress the discharge of care orders, special guardianship orders and adoption are effective. More children are achieving permanence appropriately through long-term foster care.

33. Multi-agency planning supports children to make progress and live in stable homes, with stability meetings preventing placement breakdowns where possible.

When moves are necessary, children's views are sought, and transitions are planned with management oversight.

34. Social workers work collaboratively with schools to ensure that personal education plans (PEPs) fund support that will make a difference for children. However, the attendance and attainment of children in care is variable. By the end of Year 11, many of these children are not as well prepared as they could be for adulthood.

35. Social workers show interest in children's activities and achievements, and they are proud of the progress children are making. Children are encouraged to engage in hobbies and activities that they enjoy and benefit from. Carers proactively encourage children's interests. This is supporting children to develop friendships outside of school.

36. Children's emotional and physical health needs are well met. Children attend regular health assessments, and these inform aspects of care, including in relation to neurodiversity and mental health. This enables children's identified needs to be appropriately supported. Some children and families benefit from family therapy through Myspace, which is a multi-agency team within children services, when there is identified risk of exploitation. There is a focus on families considering their life history, strengthening relationships and exploring the potential of reunification home.

37. Children at risk, including those who go missing or face harm outside the family, receive an effective response. Unaccompanied children fleeing abuse are well supported, with social workers sensitive to trauma, culture and identity, ensuring that children's needs are understood and met. Legal advice for immigration issues is provided to reduce anxiety and uncertainty for children.

38. For children subject to deprivation of liberty (DoL) orders, measures are used appropriately to reduce risk, with regular oversight and reviews considering contingency plans and transitions to adulthood.

39. A very small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes. There is strong management oversight of decision-making and consideration of how children can move to live in a registered children's home as soon as possible. Social workers visit children frequently and IROs are actively involved in the oversight of care plans.

40. Some children are living out of area or in a children's home due to a shortage of local foster carers and children's homes. Leaders know this and continue to implement plans to improve local sufficiency which are beginning to have impact. The fostering service has been on an improvement journey over the last few years. The service has strengthened through increased scrutiny, improved management oversight and effective carer recruitment. Carers' views inform service development. All these factors are supporting more carers to be approved for Sefton children. Children benefit from early permanence. Social workers know

their children well and manage transitions sensitively, supported by adoption specialists who progress plans effectively. Careful matching ensures children are placed appropriately, including with brothers and sisters where possible, and most move promptly to adoptive families with well-planned transitions. Adoption in Merseyside, the regional adoption agency, provides effective recruitment, assessment and support for adopters of Sefton children. There is strong partnership working leading to more adopters being approved. Later life letters are clear and life-story work for the majority of children is timely.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

41. Since the last inspection, there has been significant progress in the quality of service offered to care-experienced young people. Leaders have responded swiftly and effectively to the findings of the monitoring visit focusing on care leavers in February 2024. There has been further investment in the care-experienced service with the creation of an additional team of personal advisers (PAs) to increase capacity and improve the response to young people.

42. Young people are visited frequently and in line with their needs, despite some PAs describing challenging workloads. When young people need additional support at times of change or crisis, the frequency of visits is increased to meet their needs. Young people's care records reflect positive relationships, with meaningful conversations taking place, where their views are sought.

43. The early allocation of PAs for young people enables young people to develop these important relationships at the earliest opportunity. PAs have time to understand young people's stories and build a relationship with them prior to important transitions into adulthood. As a result, many care-experienced young people make positive decisions to maintain links with the service.

44. PAs know their young people well. They talk about them with pride, care and compassion. There is a culture of opting out rather than opting in when young people are over the age of 21 years, which provides valuable support and oversight for young people into adulthood. PAs respect the young adults with whom they are working and see their role as to guide and influence and, where necessary, protect them from risks. Young people are helped to develop their independence skills, without becoming overreliant on staff.

45. Since the monitoring visit in February 2024, the care-experienced hub has been developed in collaboration with young people. This is a warm and welcoming space which offers opportunities for young people to gain support in an informal environment. The hub is still in its infancy and young people spoken with by inspectors are keen to see the use of the building expand to be more accessible outside office hours.

46. The relaunch of the care-experienced council earlier this year is part of the local authority's drive to improve the voice and influence of care-experienced young

people at a strategic level. There is more work to do to build on this and ensure young people have opportunities to shape services.

47. Young people's physical and emotional health needs are met through timely access to local health services. Young people are encouraged to seek support for their emotional well-being, with PAs making referrals to appropriate services and sometimes accompanying them to appointments.

48. PAs ensure that care leavers have the personal information they need to move into adulthood. Care leavers know how to access their health records, and they have the documentation they need to support their independence.

49. Pathway plans completed by PAs bring young people's voices to life. Most pathway plans routinely include the input of other involved agencies and parties. Plans outline goals and actions to support young people to achieve their potential. Pathway plans are coproduced alongside young people wherever possible. Plans are individualised and reflect young people's identity and cultural needs. Plans include information about the local offer and services close to where young people are living, including those living out of the area.

50. Young people are aware of the local offer and their rights and entitlements. The local offer is comprehensive and includes priority housing status, free travel across Merseyside and financial support to help young people make progress with their education, employment and training.

51. Care-experienced young people with additional vulnerabilities receive well-planned multidisciplinary support. There is regular communication and effective working between children's and adult social care to identify and meet young people's needs. Multi-agency risk management meetings are held when needed to share information and inform joint planning.

52. Unaccompanied children from abroad receive a high level of support, including for their practical needs and emotional well-being. Young people live with, or close to, others from their community. They have swift access to language courses and broader educational opportunities. PAs are knowledgeable about access to legal applications for leave to remain. Careful consideration is given to ensuring that care leavers can access local amenities in line with their cultural and identity needs.

53. Care-experienced parents' individual needs are met. Where appropriate, young parents are referred for further assessment, with some parents being involved with the team around the baby. The levels of intervention are proportionate to the assessed risks and ensure that children and parents have the right support. In addition, young parents have access to regular groups which give opportunities for social activities.

54. Since the last inspection, there has been a strengthening of the housing offer for care-experienced young people. Most young people live in suitable, safe accommodation. Young people in supported accommodation and those having their own tenancies benefit from additional support available through housing providers. The accommodation officer provides a link to the housing providers in Merseyside. The worker joins meetings and completes joint visits with PAs to ensure young people understand the options available and to act as a facilitator between children's social care and housing providers. As a result, young people typically live in homes which meet their needs.

55. The number of care-experienced young people not in education, training or employment (NEET), especially those placed out of area, has reduced significantly. Leaders recognise that for the older age group of young people, there is more for them to do to help young people to develop and sustain education, employment and training.

56. PAs place a positive emphasis on employment, education and training. For young people who are NEET, there is a continuous focus on helping them back into employment or education. PAs work alongside the employability worker, which provides children with the right support as they move towards adulthood.

57. PAs are ambitious and support young people in trying to achieve their academic or personal aspirations. As a result, young people are able to pursue their goals, for example to go to university or to work in areas of specialist interest. The offer when young people go to university is strong, with financial support to ensure that they can focus on their studies.

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

58. Following the inspection in 2022, children's services experienced a period of prolonged instability in senior leadership, which impeded progress in improving services for children. The appointment of a new chief executive and director of children's services (DCS) in 2023 has brought much-needed stability, resulting in a renewed focus on improving the quality of practice across children's social care. Since then, tangible improvements across all areas in children's social care have been made. The work to further improve quality and consistency continues for children in need of help and protection.

59. The tragic events in Southport on 29 July 2024 have further strengthened partnership working. The local authority has recognised the impact of trauma for the wider community and responded through the securing of significant financial investment for psychological support and community regeneration.

60. There is a clear and compelling commitment to sustained investment in children's services, with a strong emphasis on safeguarding children and securing positive outcomes. This commitment is now embedded in the organisational culture and is

reinforced across the council, which is focused on driving improvement. The council is now prioritising children's services and there is an aligned focus on improving services for children and families. This focus is continuing with a shared acknowledgement of collective responsibilities in implementing the social care reforms in Sefton. Changes in the lead member and the council leader have strengthened this alignment, enabling a unified and ambitious vision for children's services. This vision is actively championed by the chief executive, the lead member and the council leader.

61. There is a renewed focus on corporate parenting responsibilities. The voices of care-experienced young people are increasingly shaping discussions with the board, although the board's influence and consistency in driving improvements continues to develop. The ongoing absence of police representation at the corporate parenting board has not been resolved despite the local authority's escalation of this. This hinders opportunities for a coordinated approach for children in care, for example children who are impacted by or involved with the wider criminal justice system.

62. There are strengthened strategic partnerships leading to improvements in the multi-agency safeguarding response to children, for example at the 'front door' through the introduction of CHAT and the conversational model of referral-taking. Leaders work effectively with the local safeguarding partners, including schools, to ensure that the response to children who are at risk of harm or who require a service is increasingly effective.

63. In April 2023, the responsibility for early help moved to children's services from the council's community department. Early intervention models have been developed in response to local needs. These have included the team around the baby, which is contributing to reductions in the numbers of children coming into care, and 'the team around the school', which is supporting children to receive the right help at the right time.

64. The members of the leadership team demonstrate a strong and evident commitment to continuous learning. They proactively pursue opportunities to enhance their knowledge, refine their expertise and drive sustained improvements in practice. This approach has supported significant improvements in the quality of social work practice. Leaders have strengthened internal and external scrutiny arrangements, which are now more purposeful and informed. The revised quality assurance framework enables senior leaders to maintain a more accurate and meaningful line of sight to frontline practice.

65. There has been a positive cultural shift in how performance data is used, moving beyond compliance monitoring to understanding and improving children's experiences. Tools, such as dashboards and performance clinics and auditing, support leaders' monitoring of frontline practice. These contribute to a more outcome-driven and reflective approach. The impact of this can be seen, for

example, in the effective response to children who present as homeless and for those who are privately fostered.

66. A strategic priority since the last inspection has been the strengthening of permanence for children through more effective management grip. The impact of this can been seen in the increasing number of children being matched with long-term carers, with more than 100 children being safely returned to family care following the discharge of care orders.

67. Senior leaders demonstrate an informed understanding of the strengths and areas of development of the service through accurate self-evaluation. Where shortfalls were identified during this inspection, leaders were able to evidence the action already under way to address them. The commissioning of services for children and families is now strategically aligned with local and identified need. For example, there is now a more creative approach to generating employment opportunities for care-experienced young people. There is now a clearer understanding of resource requirements and a shift towards codesigned, needs-led approaches. For example, this is leading to more meaningful involvement of young people and more choice for young people about where they can live. Improvements to transport access and financial support with travel costs are leading to greater connectivity for young people within their communities.

68. During this inspection, there were a high number of complaints received about Sefton children's services and the wider council. A considerable number of the complaints were out of the scope of this inspection. The themes from the remaining complaints have been considered as part of this inspection. Leaders have established productive engagement with some parents through one partnership group, which is directly influencing service improvements. Leaders rightly know there is more to do to embed the newly devised coproduced complaints process so that the response to complaints is consistently effective and timely.

69. To address workforce capacity challenges, leaders have strengthened the stability of the senior leadership team, managers and frontline social workers. A dedicated workforce development board has been established to enhance recruitment and retention efforts. These actions have improved workforce stability, with agency staff rates dropping significantly. This greater continuity is enabling children to build and sustain meaningful, long-term relationships with their social workers. Additionally, new social work positions have been created to boost capacity, and targeted recruitment initiatives such as hiring overseas social workers and expanding social work apprenticeship programmes are further contributing to a more stable and resilient workforce.

70. Careful monitoring of workloads and oversight of the impact of wider systems on working conditions ensure that practitioners have the capacity and ability to develop meaningful relationships with children, families and care-experienced young people. The impact of any systems change is well managed, with a

sustained focus on the experience of children and families. A comprehensive training programme is supporting the continuous professional development of staff, enabling social workers to build confidence and develop skills. Supervision is now regular, more reflective and used effectively to improve children's lives.

71. Leaders are taking a measured and considered approach to implementing the national reforms, with a focus on developing more community-based resource, while engaging with national networks to inform local decision-making. This approach enables leaders to maintain a focus on sustaining progress.

72. Leaders have positively changed the culture across Sefton children's services and the wider council, challenging a legacy of poor leadership. The staff with whom inspectors spoke were overwhelmingly complimentary about the new leadership style and appreciate leaders' visibility. Social workers consistently report that they feel well supported by managers. Morale is strong. Social workers told inspectors that their views matter and that they work in a culture that enables them in their practice. This change in culture has had a direct impact on children's experiences, with examples of creative packages of bespoke support being provided to children. These changes are making a positive difference for children, and practice is becoming more innovative.

73. The DCS and senior leadership team are appropriately focused on improving outcomes for children and have articulated clear expectations about practice while building a culture that supports good social work practice. Leaders have firm, appropriately focused plans to continue to improve. While there is clear evidence of tangible improvements across children's social care, leaders recognise that the pace of improvement must now be sustained to ensure consistently good practice for all children and young people.

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