

# Inspection of Manchester local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 22 September 2025 to 3 October 2025

**Lead inspector:** Sophie Wales, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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 children care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last inspection in 2022, determined leaders and front-line staff have consistently sustained and strengthened the quality of practice across most service areas. Children are safer and better cared for as a result.

Children in Manchester have a powerful voice. Leaders' commitment to co-production ensures that this is highly effective. Children have influenced strategic planning and system-wide redesign across the city. Leaders have been acutely responsive to need and pressure points within a climate of population growth and rising demand. Leaders have ensured significant financial investment to sustain growth across the workforce, services and partnerships.

Relationship-based ways of working have been systematically embedded, and reflective practice is now a considerable strength and takes place in most areas of practice. Leaders ensure that their response to vulnerable children is joined up and child centred. Children benefit from strong, protective and purposeful partnership working.

Leaders know their services extremely well through an effective quality assurance framework. They have invited scrutiny and challenge, and they have an accurate self-assessment.

An engaged and positive workforce benefits from visible and accountable leaders who provide strong oversight and mostly high-quality supervision. This leads to social workers making the right decisions for, and with, children and families.

## **What needs to improve?<sup>1</sup>**

- The identification and response to neglect. (outcome 3: national framework)

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

1. Early help support for children and families is very well developed, and children benefit from an exceptionally wide range of early help services. Children who are referred for an early help service receive a robust and rigorous response. Effective oversight of these arrangements means that children receive a timely response at the earliest opportunity. Children's ethnicity and identity are not always considered in decision-making and used to inform plans in this area.
2. Children receiving early help are seamlessly stepped up for social work support when their circumstances do not improve or risks emerge. Children's histories are well considered, and detailed chronologies are used to inform timely allocation and swift action. Managers record a clear rationale for decisions made.
3. Contacts and referrals are responded to in a timely way, with thresholds for services well applied. In a small number of cases, managers in the 'front door' do not always provide a sufficiently clear rationale for why decisions are made or provide clear direction for steps that need to be taken. This does not help children and families understand why protective action is needed at this time. Parents are routinely contacted in the triage and screening process, but children's voices are not always captured to support an understanding of their circumstances and to inform decisions about them. The initial response for a small number of children who have experienced domestic abuse lacks professional curiosity and this means that timely action is not always taken to fully understand children and families' needs.
4. Child protection enquiries are timely, with strong multi-agency contributions and effective information-sharing. This results in children receiving a timely protective response. For a small number of children, enquiries do not

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

sufficiently address the impact of historical patterns of harm. This means risks are not always fully considered when decisions are being made about children.

5. The effectiveness of the response to allegations against adults working with children is mostly robust. Allegations are swiftly escalated and managed through purposeful multi-agency processes. Information-sharing is effective, and credible plans ensure that the well-being of children remains central throughout.
6. Children benefit from a timely and robust emergency duty out-of-hours service with excellent communication and handover between staff and day teams. Children are safeguarded effectively by all statutory partners. Children are quickly assessed, and safety measures are put in place to ensure their immediate safety.
7. Children are visited regularly by their social workers. Visits are well recorded, and children are appropriately seen alone.
8. Assessments, including early help and pre-birth assessments, focus on children's outcomes and most are timely, well written and relevant to the needs of the child. Through direct work and observation, children's voices are mostly captured in their assessments and used well to direct and influence their plans. Skilled workers build relationships effectively with children and are sensitive to their identity and cultural needs when a social work response is needed.
9. Children in need and child protection planning is effective, with the voice of the child influencing plans. Strong partnership working contributes to the reduction of risk or need for children. Well-written safety plans provide clarity for families and professionals in the event that risks to children increase. Meetings are well attended by relevant agencies, parents and children's wider family. Child protection conference chairs provide helpful oversight in advance of meetings, which helps social workers to analyse and focus on areas of risk.
10. Since the last inspection, leaders have ensured a relentless focus on strengthening practice for disabled children. Risk is very well understood. The impact of a disability or additional need is sensitively considered. Disabled children make positive progress in line with their plan. They are seen frequently, and well-written social work visit reports bring children's experiences to life. Management oversight of work undertaken in the children with disabilities team is particularly strong. Supervision and management oversight is analytical and reflective. Managers help to develop practitioners' knowledge and competence, which enables children's plans to progress well.
11. When risks to children increase, timely decisions are made to initiate the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline. Comprehensive assessments are completed that set out risks to children well. Leaders create detailed records of their decisions with rationale. Letters to parents are of a high standard. Parents

are well supported to make necessary changes within their child's timescale. This supports many children to remain safely at home.

12. For some children who experience neglectful care, assessments and plans consider and reduce risk. However, for some children, the impact of cumulative harm is not always understood. Risk assessments are not updated with the frequency needed, and supervision does not always help social workers to consider the impact of ongoing neglect. When neglect is a feature for children subject to child protection plans, there is inconsistent use of the graded care profile tool by professionals to better understand children's experiences.
13. Once children become children in need or subject to child protection planning, the response to domestic abuse is strong, supported by an effective multi-agency response. Risk and need are understood well and are supported by timely information-sharing by partner agencies. Social workers are tenacious in their approach to working with families and perpetrators.
14. The response to children who experience exploitation has continued to strengthen. The compassion and care children receive through the complex safeguarding hub is exemplary. Sensitive direct work is completed by a range of highly skilled practitioners. Return interviews for children who go missing are timely; the analysis from workers is insightful and management oversight is strong.
15. When children aged 16 and 17 need help when they are homeless, their immediate needs are recognised. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements to become looked after and are also supported to access emergency accommodation. Children aged 16 and 17 at risk of becoming homeless receive a less-consistent response. Some of these children experience changes of workers and teams, meaning they have to tell their story twice and form relationships with new professionals who know them less well. Leaders took immediate action to address this during the inspection through the co-allocation of prevention workers with social workers in response to children's escalating needs.
16. Children in private fostering arrangements are appropriately assessed, with timely initial safeguarding checks on carers completed. More detailed assessments of private foster carers are not always completed in a timely way, which means that some needs are not fully identified as quickly as they could be. Leaders took immediate action to address this during the inspection with a review of all current arrangements and the reissuing of guidance and practice expectations.
17. Parents who educate their children at home receive effective support. The local authority facilitates a smooth transition if these children return to school. The local authority has secure oversight of children who do not attend school when they should.

## **The experiences of children in care: outstanding**

18. Tenacious and determined leaders, with strong multi-agency support, ensure that children remain living with their families when possible. Wider families are positively engaged in robust support plans to reduce risks for children through the effective use of family meetings.
19. When children are unable to remain living with their families, timely decisions for most children are made for them to enter care. Consistently detailed and comprehensive assessments about what care is needed enable children to live in stable homes where their needs are very well met. Decisions are made in the best interests of children, with sensitive consideration made to children's identity and cultural and heritage needs. Children are supported to live safely in their family network when this is possible. Careful and appropriate consideration is given to the legal status of these arrangements.
20. Children experience stability and continuity of care, leading to sustained improvement in their lives. Senior leaders have effective oversight of plans to minimise delay for children, and many children live in permanent homes that meet their needs well. Court work is of a high standard for children entering and remaining in care. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service speaks highly of the work that is completed by social workers for children entering and remaining in care.
21. Children benefit from exceptionally strong and purposeful relationships with social workers who know them well. Social workers talk about children with warmth and kindness. Children's assessments are timely, detailed and mostly updated after significant events. They provide a detailed account of children's experiences and their voice.
22. Children are visited at a frequency that meets their needs. Social workers are creative when working with children, and strong direct work and life-story work are used sensitively to help children to understand their experiences and inform future planning.
23. The needs of disabled children in care are very well understood, and the impact of their disability is sensitively considered. Children's wishes and views are gained and used to inform their plans.
24. The oversight of independent reviewing officers (IROs) is highly effective. They are strong advocates for children and hold them at the centre of their practice. Children are encouraged and supported to chair their own meetings or to contribute in a meaningful way that suits them. IROs ensure that actions are tracked to prevent unnecessary drift or delay for children. IROs hold managers to account for agreed actions through timely and determined escalation.
25. Social workers recognise the importance of brothers and sisters living together and are effective in supporting these crucial enduring relationships. Children are helped to stay in touch with those who are important to them through

creatively planned family time. Carers actively encourage and support family time. Children's views on seeing those who are important to them are listened to. This means purposeful arrangements are made for family time that meets children's needs.

26. Children in care receive an effective safeguarding response. This includes those children who go missing or who are at risk of harm outside the family.
27. Children's health needs are well addressed within care planning. For most children, health assessments and dental appointments are up to date. When needed, children receive timely therapeutic support.
28. Most children are supported to make good progress in their education with additional support accessed through personal education plans when appropriate. The attendance of children in care at school is steadily improving. Children have many opportunities to engage in fun activities and events.
29. The New Arrivals Team for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength; it enables consistency of support for children where social workers are developing specialist skills and knowledge. New arrivals are well supported by social workers, who are sensitive to their experiences and trauma. Children live in suitable arrangements that meet their religious and cultural needs. New arrivals are supported to engage well in their local community.
30. A very small proportion of children live in unregistered settings. Children are seen frequently by their social workers and IROs. Managers have close oversight of these arrangements. Deprivation of liberty orders are only sought to safeguard children when all other options have been exhausted. For most children, effective senior management oversight ensures that arrangements are regularly reviewed and adjusted in line with the risks and needs of the child. The pace of finding suitable alternative accommodation has been too slow for some children. Leaders provided firm evidence that these children would transition shortly to suitable provision.
31. When the plan is for children to return home to live with parents, reunification assessments and plans are thorough, with clear management oversight. Children's voices are evident in care planning. Placement with parent arrangements are well planned with updated risk assessments and regular oversight by senior managers.
32. Foster carers receive a good level of support from the service. The training offer for carers is strong; however, the take-up of training, particularly by kinship carers, is low. Decisions to approve new carers and for where children should live are timely, child focused and well-reasoned.
33. Leaders have robust oversight of arrangements for potential adopters and children with a plan of adoption. There is no delay for children entering adoptive homes. When support is needed, this is identified quickly and tailored to the specific needs of children and families.

34. Participation and co-production are deeply embedded through a model that places children at the heart of decision-making in Manchester. Children are rightly proud of what they achieve. Highly motivated and impressive care-experienced young people, known as care consultants, are engaged in paid roles to shape and influence service design for children. Other children in care are also actively involved in recruitment of staff and some take on staff mentoring roles. This approach fosters a strong sense of belonging and value. As a result, services are becoming increasingly responsive, inclusive and child centred. Children told inspectors how their participation and engagement are contributing to their positive self-regard and self-worth.
35. Prompt, creative and carefully considered plans are in place for children, including those with disabilities, to ensure that they are supported to transition well into adulthood.

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

36. Trusted and reliable relationships are at the heart of the support provided to care leavers. Personal advisers (PAs) talk about care leavers with pride, care and compassion. They have an excellent knowledge of care leavers' needs and histories. PAs know their care leavers exceedingly well and celebrate their individual strengths and traits. PAs support care leavers to maintain or re-establish important relationships with parents, wider family, former carers and friends. This is contributing to care leavers' sense of value and worth.
37. The local offer for care leavers has been developed in consultation with the local authority care consultants. The offer is comprehensive and varied and meets the needs of care leavers very well. The offer has become widely accessible through a user-friendly app developed with care consultants.
38. Most care leavers meet their PAs at a time that meets their needs well. This strong practice is helping to build trusting relationships and PAs' understanding about care leavers' needs and histories. For unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, however, PAs are not allocated in a timely way. Leaders have credible plans in place to address this gap.
39. For children in care aged 16 and 17, highly effective management and IRO oversight ensure the progress of plans and timely interventions to prepare children for leaving care once they become 18 years old.
40. PAs keep in regular touch with care leavers when this is what they want and need. Visits are mostly face to face and are led by the care leavers with regard to venues or activities that they wish to do when this is appropriate. PAs see care leavers in their homes to ensure they have all the support they need.
41. Pathway plans are purposeful documents. Most care leavers' pathway plans are co-produced between PAs and care leavers and set out care leavers' needs and aspirations and how these will be met. When there are significant changes in

care leavers' lives, pathway plans are updated. Pathway plans recognise care leavers' strengths and celebrate their achievements. Care leavers told inspectors that these are helpful documents.

42. Particular attention is paid to ensuring that care leavers have appropriate documentation to help establish themselves independently, prove their identity, travel easily and open bank accounts. This also helps them to be work ready.
43. Care leavers' physical and emotional health needs are met extremely well through universal and specialist health services. The impact of earlier trauma and separation is understood and considered thoughtfully in planning for care leavers. Individual health needs of disabled care leavers are very well supported. Capacity assessments are considered where relevant.
44. Care leavers live in safe, suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Care leavers are mostly involved in choosing their accommodation. Care leavers are well supported to develop skills to manage a tenancy, maintain home standards and live independently. If care leavers are unable to maintain their tenancy and are at risk of homelessness, appropriate and swift action is taken to ensure that they have a safe place to stay. Many care leavers benefit from the long-term stability of thoughtfully promoted 'staying put' arrangements.
45. New arrival care leavers are offered suitable accommodation and are supported well to access education and training opportunities. New arrivals are encouraged to access the local offer and to engage in social and community networks. When this is needed, new arrivals are provided with advice to attain relevant legal status in the country. Their cultural and identity needs are increasingly well met by PAs who are steadily developing specialisms in this area of work. Care leavers benefit from sensitive work from the new arrivals team, which is helping some to find and establish contact with family or relatives from their country of origin.
46. Care leavers with additional vulnerabilities receive well-planned multi-disciplinary support. Well-written risk assessments and safety plans are a considerable strength. These are reviewed by team managers and signed off by the service manager, which means leaders are provided with an overview of the most vulnerable care leavers in the service.
47. A high level of support is offered to care leavers who are parents, both to address their own individual needs and to draw in services to help them provide good care for their children. PAs are quick to respond to care leavers on both a practical and emotional level in order to avoid future difficulties. They are also involved in the multi-agency planning in respect of the care leavers' children.
48. Care leavers in custody receive regular visits and support from their PAs. PAs ensure that care leavers in custody have access to information about the local offer and the support that is available to them while in custody. PAs liaise with

prisons, probation and health services to develop care leavers' plans for the most effective rehabilitation into the community.

49. Care leavers access sensitive and bespoke careers advice, which supports them to access a wide range of job and training opportunities. Care leavers are supported to stay in or reconnect to education and training at a time that supports them best. For some care leavers, entry to education, employment and training is not always sufficiently ambitious or aspirational.
50. Care leavers receive a positive response if they request support after they become 21. The local authority has clear arrangements in place to ensure that care leavers know about their entitlement to ongoing support if this is needed. Community-based hubs across the city are providing an invaluable base for care leavers to access during the week. Virtual hubs are increasingly accessed by care leavers when seeking advice or support.
51. Care consultants have played an active part in developing the community hubs. Some are involved in overseeing services and hubs in a paid capacity. This ensures active ongoing scrutiny of work delivered by the service. Care consultants are instrumental in setting the priorities and driving progress for interventions for care leavers.

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

52. Senior leaders have high aspirations for all children to succeed in Manchester. Through their tenacious and determined efforts over many years, leaders have ensured significant improvement across all service areas. Since the last inspection, support for children needing help and protection has strengthened, children in care and care leavers' experiences are highly positive, and the influence of children's voices is exceptional.
53. The experiences for many children have significantly improved since the last inspection. There is strong political and corporate support for children's services, with significant ongoing financial investment. Senior leaders have adopted a highly successful 'test and learn' approach to strengthening and embedding a wide range of impressive services for vulnerable children.
54. Senior leaders have high aspirations for children. Children benefit from strong partnerships in which leaders with a commitment to continuous improvement share an ambition for children to thrive. With a strong political and corporate focus on children, leaders ensure that their response to vulnerable children is joined up and child centred.
55. Leaders know their services well through a robust quality assurance process, and they have also encouraged and welcomed external scrutiny. Audit moderation is a particular strength; it provides helpful learning opportunities for

social workers and ensures that responsive action is taken when areas of practice need to strengthen.

56. Senior leaders are visible, influential, open and approachable. Senior leaders' footprint is evident in children's records. Management oversight and direction are now consistently more purposeful across many service areas. This supports a high-quality response to children and families.
57. Workers feel well supported by managers and senior leaders. Relationship-based practice is well embedded and is a strength. It is also helping partners to consider trauma differently and, as such, tailor their responses to vulnerable children.
58. Supervision in most parts of the service is of a high quality. Supervision is regular, reflective and purposeful, with resultant actions that are mostly SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound). Informal discussions take place between staff and their managers to support them in their day-to-day practice.
59. Caseloads across the service are mostly manageable, which means that social workers can spend time with children and create purposeful relationships with them. When caseloads are more pressured, leaders are aware of this. Leaders have committed significant investment to manage the rising demand on social workers.
60. Social workers and practitioners have access to a wide range of relevant development and learning opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge and to develop areas of expertise and specialism. Induction for most staff is comprehensive.
61. Leaders' relentless focus on the recruitment and retention of social workers has seen the workforce systematically strengthen with an overall reduction in the use of agency staff. Many agency staff have recently converted to permanent roles, and vacancy rates for social workers are now below the national average. This means that children are having more stability in their lives with adults they know and trust.
62. Participation is a strength and making a tangible difference to children's experiences and progress, with a model of engagement that is strong and purposeful. The voice and influence of children across Manchester are impactful through a wide range of participatory opportunities.

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