

Inspection of Solihull local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 November to 14 November 2025

Lead inspector: Steve Bailey, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2022, when services were found to be inadequate, leaders have taken deliberate and decisive action to transform children's services.

Corporate prioritisation, strengthened governance, targeted investment, workforce restructuring and strategic partnership working have combined to deliver wide-ranging improvements for children, families and care-experienced young people in Solihull.

Children now benefit from more timely, well-coordinated support, and those in care live in stable, nurturing homes, while care leavers receive more consistent, aspirational support into adulthood. There remain areas where practice needs to become consistently stronger, particularly in permanence planning, care planning, and in the systematic use of children's voices. Leaders have a demonstrable track record of delivering improvement since the last inspection and show a clear commitment to securing further sustainable progress.

What needs to improve?¹

- The quality of joint assessments for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. (Outcome 1, national framework)
- The quality of assessments for children in care. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- The consistency and impact of independent reviewing officers. (Enabler 2, national framework)
- The tracking of permanency planning for children in care, including the recognition and celebration of decisions about children's long-term care. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- The clarity of actions set out in pathway plans to help care leavers achieve their aspirations and make a successful transition to adulthood. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- Children's collective influence and participation, specifically through the corporate parenting panel. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- Oversight and scrutiny of the impact of commissioned advocacy and specialist mental health services for children in care. (Outcome 4, national framework)

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

1. Children in Solihull benefit from much-strengthened community-based early help. When targeted support is required, skilled early help practitioners complete detailed assessments and co-ordinate multi-agency plans that make a positive difference to the lives of most children and their families. Escalation to statutory services is timely when risks increase, meaning most children get the help they need at the right time.
2. Social workers progress most contacts into the multi-agency safeguarding hub promptly. Clear management oversight, strong partner involvement and well-applied thresholds ensure proportionate decisions that reflect children's circumstances.
3. When children are at risk of harm, social workers act without delay. Strategy discussions are timely and well attended, enabling detailed information-sharing and appropriate decisions about next steps. Social workers visit children promptly, use direct work to understand their lived experiences, and triangulate information well through comprehensive child protection enquiries. Subsequent child protection conferences are convened quickly when needed. Social workers routinely involve children's family networks in safety planning at the earliest

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.

opportunity to reduce risk. Social workers draw on their detailed knowledge of children's family networks to continually strengthen support throughout their journey. Consequently, practitioners have a clear and holistic understanding of children's circumstances, and swift, well-coordinated support and intervention reduces risk for most children.

4. The emergency duty team provides an effective service to children who need social work support outside of office hours. Social workers are responsive to risk and need, taking prompt and proportionate action, including working with partner agencies and visiting children who need it urgently.
5. The quality of social work assessments of children's needs is a strength. Most are child focused, thorough and timely, drawing on regular visits, the voices of children and their families, and partner agency input. Tools that support assessment of neglect and parental substance misuse, along with genograms, help ensure clear analysis of risk and need. Most social workers begin coordinating the help and support children require at the earliest stage of the assessment process, so that help commences before needs escalate. Analysis is usually detailed, leading to appropriate recommendations. Management oversight ensures that decisions are well considered. As a result, children's needs are clearly understood and addressed effectively, with assessments driving timely and proportionate support.
6. Children's plans are well tailored to their needs. They clearly set out the concerns that led to social care involvement and the objectives for the period of support, drawing on the views of children, parents and partner agencies to ensure that support is relevant and targeted. Most plans include actions that are specific, measurable and timebound, providing clarity and accountability. Contingency planning is generally appropriate but is often recorded in a generic manner when shared with families. Consequently, some families are not clearly informed about the action social workers will take if plans are not adhered to or if progress is insufficient for children.
7. Most child-in-need and child protection reviews ensure timely progress for children and their families. Well-attended review meetings and core groups regularly update plans with families and partner agencies, keeping support aligned with new or emerging needs. For children with longer standing or cyclical involvement, progress is generally steady. However, in these instances, reviews focus too narrowly on recent support and short-term improvements rather than evaluating the sustainable impact of interventions over time. As a result, planning in these reviews lacks sufficient clarity about next steps, expectations or timescales when overall progress remains limited.
8. Most children and families with a child-in-need or child protection plan benefit from purposeful social work. Regular visits, trusted relationships and a clear understanding of children's lived experiences ensure that most support is effective. Most social workers are tenacious when families are anxious or

ambivalent about making the changes children need, applying restorative practice principles to strengthen engagement and support families to make improvements. Visits to children, including those that are unannounced, take place in a variety of settings, with social workers using creative direct work and observations to capture children's wishes and feelings. Responses to neglect help most children make progress, and specialist assessments, including when sexual abuse is a concern, are commissioned appropriately. Extended family members continue to be involved through effective family group conferences, and referrals to other services are made quickly when needed.

9. When risks increase or do not reduce, most children's circumstances are appropriately escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline. Leaders, managers and the court progression officer track pre-proceedings work well, resulting in most children's circumstances improving or being brought before the court without unnecessary delay. When children step down from pre-proceedings, senior managers review their circumstances at defined intervals to ensure sustained progress.
10. Disabled children and their families benefit from skilled workers in the Children with Disabilities service. Workers take a holistic approach, considering siblings' needs and making young carer referrals. Assessments are child focused, using direct work and tools, and informed by parents, carers and professionals.
11. The Families Together service offers effective, child focused and therapeutic interventions to children at risk of entering care, helping most children remain at home, when it is safe for them to do so.
12. When children are identified as living in private fostering arrangements, social workers are effective in assessing and supporting their needs. Assessments include statutory checks and strong analysis. Most social workers keep the suitability and duration of the private fostering arrangement under review through regular visiting alongside formal annual review.
13. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive prompt support and safe accommodation. They are routinely informed of their rights and offered an advocate. However, joint assessments are not effective or meaningful in assessing children's wider needs at this particularly vulnerable time in their lives. Leaders were aware of this issue before the inspection and are working to improve practice.
14. The local authority designated officer robustly manages allegations against professionals who work with children. Valued expertise and advice are provided to potential referrers at an early stage to support prompt initial action. Decisions are well recorded, and actions are pursued to completion to manage risk.

15. Assessments of young carers are detailed, child-friendly and collaborative. Young carers have access to help and support appropriate to their age and level of understanding.
16. Children living at home or in care who are at risk of exploitation receive coordinated and meaningful interventions from specialist workers. The daily hub meetings and overarching multi-agency adult and child exploitation (MAACE) panels are effective in identifying, tracking and responding to risks.
17. Children who go missing from home or care receive a largely effective response. Most return home conversations are offered within 72 hours, and the majority of children take up this offer. These conversations are usually completed promptly, helping practitioners understand the reasons why children go missing and identify support that reduces the risk of further incidents. While the quality of these conversations varies, workers escalate concerns appropriately and use direct work with children, their families and carers to strengthen stability and address the causes of children going missing effectively. Leaders had already identified this variability prior to the inspection and are due to introduce changes to management oversight for each return home conversation to assist practice improvement.
18. Most children who are electively home educated benefit from good council oversight. Appropriate and relevant enquiries are made, working in close partnership with other teams and agencies, to identify and respond to concerns about children's welfare.

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

19. When children come into care, decisions are appropriate, overseen by senior managers and clearly recorded. This ensures that children can understand why important decisions were made. Most decisions are taken at a time that meets children's needs. However, entries to care are not timely or well planned for a small number of children, in cases where work to prevent care admission has not been sufficiently robust. These children experience unplanned or crisis entry, making the start of their care journey more unsettled than it need be.
20. Family network discussions are held whenever possible to identify safe kinship options, helping some children remain within their wider families. Most assessments of kinship carers begin before children move or are completed swiftly when emergencies occur. When family care is not possible, placement decisions prioritise family-based settings with careful matching, supporting children's cultural identity and stability. Children living in registered children's homes, and the small number living far away from Solihull, do so in line with their assessed needs.

21. Most children in care benefit from warm, trusting relationships with social workers who know them well and record their experiences sensitively. These relationships help children feel understood and confident that their views matter. However, inconsistent use of advocacy and limited reassessment of children's wider needs as they progress through care mean that some children have less influence over their plans and sustained progress when their needs change. While assessments and plans ensure that risk is managed and family time supported, children's broader needs are not consistently translated into clear, measurable actions, making the impact on their day-to-day experiences less tangible.
22. Most children live in stable, nurturing homes that meet their needs and support their hobbies, identity and relationships. However, if arrangements begin to show signs of fragility, the response is inconsistent. Leaders have introduced a new policy to strengthen support for at-risk placements, but it is too early to see an impact, and a small number of children continue to experience repeated, potentially avoidable, moves.
23. Life-story work is a clear and consistent strength. Social workers and family support workers understand its importance in helping children make sense of their experiences, and therapeutic life-story work is used effectively. This sensitive work helps children understand their past, reduces confusion and strengthens their sense of identity and emotional security.
24. Children's relationships with the people who matter to them are promoted well. The dedicated family time service and involvement of wider relatives help children enjoy safe, natural and meaningful experiences. This supports identity, emotional well-being and continuity of important family bonds.
25. Social workers maintain constructive relationships with parents, helping most remain positively involved in their children's lives. Specialist assessments, including those for parents with learning needs, ensure that parents receive accessible support, helping them contribute to their children's plans and future arrangements.
26. Reviewing arrangements have strengthened considerably since the last inspection but remain inconsistent in their impact. When children benefit from the same independent reviewing officer (IRO) over time, planning gains clarity and pace, underpinned by regular visiting and early reviews convened when circumstances change. However, changes in IRO disrupt continuity for a significant number of children, and challenge from reviews is not always reflected in subsequent plans, contributing to drift for a minority.
27. Arrangements for tracking children's progress towards permanence have improved, with regular permanence meetings and senior oversight helping to drive planning. However, for many children, decisions regarding permanence are not timely or communicated to them directly to celebrate this important

milestone. This limits children's ability to understand important steps in securing their long-term home.

28. Most children's education is supported with care and commitment, and the virtual school knows its pupils well. Although the quality of personal education plans produced vary, work with schools and other council services is effective, with most children making progress in their learning and emotional well-being at school from when they enter care.
29. Children's physical health needs are well identified and met, with sustained improvement in dental attendance and timeliness of review health assessments. However, access to mental health support remains too inconsistent. While social workers provide additional emotional support and referrals to counselling services, children wait too long for an assessment from the specially commissioned mental health service. As a result, some children experience delays in having their needs fully understood, limiting carers' and social workers' ability to respond effectively.
30. Most disabled children in care live in homes that meet their needs, benefit from social workers who know them well, and receive timely life-story work and careful planning. When children are likely to require ongoing support from adult services, most referrals are progressed early enough to support effective transitions.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by a specialist social work team that is knowledgeable and sensitive to their unique experiences. Children build positive relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly, support legal and solicitor processes, and provide interpreters and translated documents when needed. Children are supported into education, make good progress and are encouraged to be aspirational. Children also benefit from facilitated activities such as sports, cultural events and social outings.
32. Children subject to deprivation of liberty restrictions receive careful oversight and sensitive direct work. Decisions are appropriately informed by legal planning, and risk assessments are regularly updated.
33. A very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes while registered ones are sought. The majority of children live in these unlawful homes for as short a time as possible. Robust leadership oversight and frequent visiting help minimise risk and promote children's progress.
34. Too many children remain at home on care orders for longer than necessary, but strengthened practice, capacity and 'fast-track' protocols with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service are accelerating safe discharge. Leaders have a detailed knowledge of children in these circumstances and have developed a robust and agile service to expedite assessments and applications

to court, as well as providing targeted help so families can make progress towards orders ending.

35. Since the last inspection, the fostering service has strengthened the support children and carers receive. Carers report feeling supported through supervision, training and the 'nurture year'. Some inconsistencies remain in the quality of fostering assessments and in capturing children's voices in carers' logs to inform decisions. Leaders have a clear understanding of these strengths and areas for development, and their systematic and detailed fostering service development plan is already showing impact and improvements across the service.
36. Work to secure permanence through special guardianship shows clear strengths. Revised policies now remove any financial disincentive, helping increasing numbers of children achieve family-based permanence through special guardianship orders.
37. Adoption work is sensitive and child focused, with strong child permanence reports and later-life letters. Partnerships between the regional adoption agency (Adoption Central England) and the local authority support planning, although timeliness in progressing adopters through assessment can be slow. Adopters value preparation and support overall, but some experience reduced support after placement and inconsistencies in joined-up working.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

38. Personal advisers (PAs) are allocated to children at an early stage, enabling most to build trusting and meaningful relationships before they leave care. Effective joint working between social workers and PAs ensures that transitions are handled sensitively and in line with young people's individual needs. Pathway plans are completed before the final looked after review and updated thereafter. These plans are generally clear and aspirational, although for a minority of young people they do not set out explicitly how they will be helped to achieve their goals. While the frequency and quality of early contact vary, most young people benefit from a positive and planned transition into adulthood.
39. PAs are experienced and highly committed to their young people. They understand young people's histories and how trauma affects their daily lives. Interpreters are used routinely when needed, and long-standing PA relationships offer stability, reassurance and practical support that young people value highly.
40. Most young people receive regular and purposeful visits, tailored to their circumstances. When contact is timely and proportionate, PAs are effective in coordinating multi-agency support so that young people's needs are prioritised and responded to well. For a small number of young people, visiting is not

always proportionate to their needs, meaning they do not always receive the timely support they require when their circumstances change.

41. Young people who choose to end PA involvement after they reach the age of 21 are kept updated about their rights and entitlements through bi-annual contact. The 'always-here' offer ensures that they can return for advice, guidance or befriending up to the age of 25 and beyond. This provides a strong safety net and continuity of support.
42. PAs have a strong understanding of Solihull's comprehensive local offer for care leavers, which has been considerably strengthened since the last inspection and co-produced with young people. PAs routinely advocate effectively in order to ensure that young people understand and secure their entitlements.
43. Care-experienced parents receive bespoke help, including access to a newly formed parent-and-child group and specialist advice from agencies such as the department for work and pensions. This reduces isolation and builds confidence in parenting and planning for work.
44. Separated migrant young people receive culturally sensitive and highly responsive support. Workers understand immigration processes well, ensure access to legal advice, and help young people with family tracing, reducing isolation. Their emotional, education and accommodation needs are met sensitively within the context of their lived experiences.
45. Young people in custody remain in regular contact with their PAs, who advocate for access to work and training, and plan effectively with probation, prison and housing colleagues to support reintegration on release.
46. PAs prioritise young people's physical, emotional and mental health, working well with adult mental health and voluntary sector partners so that emerging needs are addressed quickly and holistically.
47. Young people are well supported to engage in education, employment and training. Close joint working with the skills and employment team has increased opportunities significantly. Broader education, employment and training options, strengthened further by a community parenting board, have helped more young people access apprenticeships, paid work and pathways aligned to their interests. PAs are tenacious with care leavers who experience setbacks, helping confidence and participation to grow steadily.
48. Pathway plans are generally timely and focus appropriately on key issues facing young people, including accommodation and education, employment and training. However, for some young people, plans are not always created collaboratively or sufficiently translated into specific, measurable actions, limiting their impact.

49. Support to help young people prepare for independence is strong. Young people benefit from 'trainer flat' experiences, a range of accommodation options and well-established links with housing providers. The council's recognition of care experience as a protected characteristic has widened entitlements and opportunities since the last inspection.
50. Leaders have also strengthened the sufficiency and suitability of accommodation available to care-experienced young people. As a result, most now live in suitable accommodation. PAs support young people to remain with foster carers where appropriate and to secure tenancies at a pace that is right for them. The dedicated accommodation officer provides valued oversight, ensuring timely, suitable moves.
51. Risks associated with exploitation are managed well through joint planning with adult services, MAACE oversight and targeted interventions. PAs remain actively involved in risk-management discussions, contributing to effective continuity of support at transition.
52. Young people who met with inspectors spoke highly of their PAs and the wider council. They describe being helped to secure safe housing, understand their rights, access grants, manage benefits, and pursue learning, apprenticeships and university pathways. Young people consistently reported that PAs are approachable, contactable and always there for them.

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

53. Since the last inspection, senior leaders, including the chief executive and the outgoing director of children's services (DCS), have driven rapid improvement from a very low base. When early progress was too slow, leaders made bold and well-judged decisions to redesign their approach and reset relationships with strategic partners, creating the conditions for accelerated change.
54. Children are now an explicit corporate priority. Despite significant financial pressures, elected members have taken purposeful decisions to invest in the services that children need. Early help has been considerably strengthened through the development of four family hubs and targeted services offering accessible and effective support. Capacity has increased in teams supporting care leavers, children at risk of exploitation, those on the edge of care and children living at home on a care order. Three new children's homes have opened, giving children in care more stable, local options. The local offer for care leavers has been significantly strengthened, providing better financial support and more timely, suitable accommodation. This coherent programme of substantial investment has led to measurable improvements in children's experiences and progress.

55. Corporate and political oversight is now much stronger. The chief executive and lead member meet regularly with senior leaders, scrutinising performance, risk and improvement. A significantly enhanced performance framework provides leaders with live, reliable data, supporting informed decision-making and timely action.
56. Senior leaders have strengthened corporate parenting arrangements. Councillors now demonstrate a clearer understanding of their responsibilities, and purposeful work by the corporate parenting board has led to tangible improvements, including improving the timeliness of health and dental checks, enabling children in care to register for housing at 16 and recognising care experience as a protected characteristic. However, the ways in which the direct voices and experiences of children and young people influence the board are underdeveloped, and scrutiny of mental health support and advocacy for children in care requires a more systematic approach. Leaders had already recognised these gaps before the inspection and have credible plans to address them.
57. Leaders champion a system-wide focus on children, resulting in much stronger and better-aligned partnership working. They play an active and influential role in the safeguarding partnership, contributing to enhanced scrutiny of multi-agency arrangements to help keep children safe. Strengthened partnership governance has transformed the integrated front door into a consistent and confident multi-agency service. Leaders have also galvanised local businesses into an impressive and growing 'community parenting board', which has offered over 700 opportunities to young people in the last two years, including work experience, apprenticeships, befriending, practical help, gifts of laptops and help to decorate their first home.
58. Leaders have worked constructively with their commissioner and improvement partner, and used external scrutiny, monitoring visits and peer reviews to continually test progress and refine their 'Ambitious for Children' plan. Quality assurance (QA) activity is well embedded and increasingly provides a nuanced line of sight into practice. Although the quality and impact of individual audit work is inconsistent, learning from QA is informing training and promoting greater consistency. Leaders have established productive relationships with regional partners to secure ongoing external challenge to help sustain improvements.
59. Leaders have a clear understanding of their services and have produced a largely accurate self-evaluation. They recognise the areas that need further improvement, including the pace of discharge of care orders for children placed at home, permanency planning, and strengthening the quality of some supervision. Leaders responded positively to inspectors' feedback and are clearly ambitious to further develop practice.

60. Workforce consultation has led to an effective restructure that is embedding a culture of support and constructive challenge. Managers are increasingly held to account for the quality and timeliness of practice and respond appropriately when shortfalls are identified. However, recent IRO absence has disrupted continuity and slowed progress, and decisions about reallocation, while made in consultation with parents, have occasionally not been taken quickly enough. Workloads are generally manageable, and staff benefit from regular supervision, although the quality of reflection, action planning and review remains variable across teams.
61. Workforce stability has improved markedly, leading to significant reductions in the use of agency workers. The workforce, including the emergency duty team, is increasingly experienced, motivated and confident. Leaders promote an inclusive, restorative culture and staff report feeling valued, supported and safe.
62. Continuing professional development is prioritised. Newly qualified workers benefit from structured support, and mentoring is strengthening practice across teams. Access to training has improved, and a positive learning culture is fostered through events that promote consistent, reflective practice and celebrate diversity.
63. Leaders and managers share a clear vision and direction for their services, contributing to a renewed sense of stability and shared purpose for children in Solihull. Planned transition arrangements to a newly appointed DCS have been thoughtfully managed to maintain momentum, promote continuity and keep the focus firmly on children's priorities.

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