

Portsmouth City Council

Inspection of local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 September 2018 to 14 September 2018

Lead inspector: Linda Steele
Her 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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Portsmouth have improved since the last inspection. Despite increasing demand, leaders have made good progress in establishing a resilient and sustainable service. The service that children and families receive is now good overall.

The senior leadership team articulate a clear, shared vision and set of values. They are ambitious and have an accurate and realistic understanding of the strengths and areas for development of the service. They use this knowledge well to actively improve services. Effective planning has led to a more secure and stable workforce, and most workers have manageable caseloads. Strong political and corporate support for children's services ensures that children's needs are prioritised.

Children receive reliably good support at the right level, resulting in positive outcomes for the majority. Children in need of help and protection receive a good service, but not all child protection plans are progressed at the pace needed.

The participation of and direct work with children and families are key strengths. Social workers are supported to deliver meaningful intervention to sustain positive change and safe long-term outcomes for children. Children are at the heart of social work practice.

The senior leadership team has worked resolutely to create a learning culture that is responsive to change. The team has created a sustainable quality assurance system that supports continual service improvement effectively. The rigour applied to quality assurance is impressive and ensures that agreed standards are met and that outcomes for children improve.

What needs to improve

- The length of time that children are subject to pre-proceedings.
- Child protection plans and care planning need to be clear about what needs to be achieved, by when and what will happen if the situation does not improve for the child.
- The effectiveness of child protection conference chairs in responding to escalating risks or identifying when progress is not being made for children.

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

1. An increasing number of children and families access support from a wide range of early help services that provide effective support and practical help to prevent problems increasing. As part of the city's 'Stronger Futures' programme, co-located early help locality teams work with the whole family. An enhanced child health offer for 0- to 5-year-olds has appropriately increased the proportion of early help plans led by the health visiting service. Targeted early help for 5- to 19-year-olds is focusing interventions appropriately to ensure that children receive proportionate support.
2. Early help assessments and plans successfully capture children's needs and lead to a range of effective support. The use of a restorative practice model and a single assessment, supported by standardised assessment tools, are key elements of the integrated offer. Children are appropriately referred to social work services when their needs increase. Senior leaders recognise that there is more to do to strengthen stepping down arrangements when statutory intervention is no longer required.
3. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) provides an effective response when children's needs increase. Partnership working is strong, with co-

location of agencies, including early help, ensuring timely information-sharing to support good decision-making.

4. Social workers and managers ensure that timely and appropriate decisions are made about the next steps that are required to ensure that children are helped and protected. However, the rationale for these decisions is not always recorded in accurate detail in children's records.
5. Governance arrangements are well embedded and rigorous quality assurance arrangements are in place, including a MASH quarterly threshold audit. The partnership has made progress in strengthening threshold understanding and embedding arrangements for sharing information. The local authority has worked diligently to ensure that parental consent is sought but has more work to do to ensure that this is consistently in place.
6. A stable and sufficient workforce ensures that social workers have the capacity to visit children proportionately to their needs. Social workers have meaningful relationships with children. They develop a good understanding of children's experiences through a range of interventions. Strong assessments provide a good sense of the child's needs, supported by high-quality chronologies that ensure that social workers consider children's life events.
7. Children in need benefit from good support. Plans are appropriately targeted to meet their individual needs. Regular reviews take place, with good engagement from partners. Team leaders who chair these reviews provide a further level of scrutiny and oversight.
8. Senior leaders recognised weaknesses in the oversight of the children with disabilities team and responded by moving the team back into the children's services directorate. This has led to improvements to the degree of management oversight, and these children now benefit from some effective help and support. There is more to do to ensure that intervention is of a consistently high quality.
9. When concerns about children's welfare increase, social workers act promptly to assess risk and take effective protective action. However, most initial strategy discussions only include police and children's social care. They do not include sufficient information to evidence the rationale for the decisions taken or set out a plan of the key actions needed for the section 47 enquiry. In contrast, subsequent strategy meetings include key professionals and lead to comprehensive information-sharing and authoritative decisions made regarding next steps.
10. Child protection plans are not clear enough about what needs to be achieved, the specific actions required, or the timescales for completion. They are not always clear about how progress will be measured or what needs to happen if the situation does not improve or if concerns escalate. Core groups and review conferences take place in a timely way but are not always effective in

progressing the plan. Consequently, there is slow progress against actions for a small minority of children. Recent action (July 2018) by senior managers to address this has led to an action plan to strengthen planning and improve the scrutiny and oversight of plans by child protection conference chairs.

11. Pre-proceedings are used appropriately when risks escalate, or when children's situations do not improve. These are well managed at the start of the process. However, a small minority of children remain subject to pre-proceedings for too long. For the majority of these children, there has been a history of previous ineffective preventative services and weak planning, particularly where concerns are chronic or longstanding. Although pre-proceedings work is tracked and monitored, there is more to do to ensure that delay is avoided, and that authoritative action is taken when children's situations do not improve.
12. There is an effective response to children who go missing from home, but the quality and timeliness of return home interviews are not yet consistently good enough. Staff consider effectively analysis from return home interviews, but not how children present on their return.
13. Social workers recognise contextual safeguarding risks well. Children are well supported by decisive interventions. Children benefit from a range of well-commissioned services that increase their sense of well-being and reduce risk. Risk assessment tools inform decision-making regarding the level of concern, and wider risks are managed through the Missing, Exploited and Trafficked strategy meeting.
14. Senior managers have acted to tackle the weaknesses identified at the last inspection in respect of the response to children living in private fostering arrangements and homeless young people aged 16 and 17. As a result, the needs of children and young people are well assessed, and they are well supported.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is good

15. The local authority's well-embedded restorative model of practice draws on families' strengths, focusing on maintaining children in their families wherever possible. The new edge of care service is beginning to reduce harm for children and providing intensive support to enable children to remain at home.
16. When children need to come into care, decisions are based on a comprehensive assessment of risk and need. A careful approach is taken to matching children with foster families. Children in care are well supported by carers who promote their needs and help them to achieve.

17. The growing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children becoming looked after has had an impact on the availability of placements in the city. Despite an increase in the number of available placements over the last year, the increase in demand means that there is a continued shortfall in foster placements locally. The impact of this is that not as many children live as close to their homes and families as the local authority would like. This results in some delays in the completion of health assessments or securing educational provision for a small minority of those children placed at a distance. Senior leaders are tackling this through an ambitious sufficiency plan, which is well-thought-out and well managed but is not yet having enough impact.
18. Foster carer recruitment, training and approval are effective. The fostering panel meets regularly and carries out its core duties robustly. Information provided to the panel is of a good standard. Foster carers report that they feel part of the professional network and that their views are valued and used to influence children's plans, policy and service developments.
19. The quality of recording of children's care plans and reviews is variable. Some are not sufficiently specific and lack clarity about the timescales in which actions need to be achieved. Stronger examples identify specific needs and set clear actions, with timescales that are unique to each child. Despite the weaknesses in care planning and review documentation, most children experience improved outcomes when they become looked after.
20. Children are consistently and thoughtfully supported to participate in their reviews, with good access to advocates and independent visitors. Reviews take place regularly and carefully consider each child's needs and promote their well-being. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are strong advocates for children and challenge appropriately to ensure that children's plans progress without delay. Letters written to children by IROs provide an overview of the review meeting and eloquently capture the child's experience and the rationale for decision-making. This helps children to understand the decisions that are made and supports future life-story work.
21. Social workers have good relationships with children. Children's wishes and feelings are actively sought and acted on. Children's records are child friendly; they bring the child to life and evidence a real sense of care. Sensitive and thoughtful direct work influences planning and interventions for children. Life-story work helps children understand their situations, but not all children have access to a life-story book.
22. The vast majority of children in care have timely assessments of their health. The dedicated child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) looked after children team is providing a proactive response to children's emotional

well-being needs. This provides children, carers and professionals with direct and indirect support through a range of services.

23. Education is promoted for children in care. The virtual school is increasingly effective in ensuring that children make good progress and reach their potential. The virtual head works alongside other professionals to challenge schools where the needs of children in care are not being met. Pupil premium funding is well targeted to meet children's, needs and personal education plans include an appropriate emphasis on the academic progress of pupils. In previous years, children looked after did not achieve well in their key stage 2 test for writing. This year, however, there has been an improvement. This is the result of teachers and local authority caseworkers working together effectively to meet the needs of these children. Nevertheless, there is still more to do to increase attendance and attainment and reduce exclusions.
24. Despite some concerted work since the last inspection, some children in care continue to engage in offending behaviours. Senior managers have reviewed the plans for these children to ensure that effective interventions are in place to reduce the likelihood of re-offending.
25. Permanence is considered at the earliest opportunity for most children. Foster to adopt is considered and implemented when appropriate to support early permanence. Social workers recognise the importance of promoting all aspects of permanence, including special guardianship and adoption. High-quality special guardianship assessments enable good decisions regarding whether children can safely stay within their extended family network. Careful thought is given to the relationships of brothers and sisters in considering future permanence plans.
26. Children who need adoption benefit from timely decision-making and effective planning. Good assessment, training and support is available for prospective adopters. Children move quickly to live with their adoptive families and they enjoy stability. Good use is made of the adoption support fund to meet children's therapeutic needs. Close work with CAMHS, the virtual school, educational psychologists and play therapists holistically supports carers to meet their children's needs.
27. Care leavers benefit from a specialist service that is increasingly responsive to their needs. Personal advisers are persistent in engaging young people, creatively using networks of support to keep in touch. Support needs are captured in pathway plans that are co-produced with young people. The quality of these is improving. Although young people do receive information about their health histories, there is more to do to ensure that this information is meaningful and provided in an accessible format.
28. Opportunities for young people to remain with foster carers after their 18th birthdays are promoted, including for some young people who have returned

to foster carers when their plans have changed. The 'staying close' programme is in early development and enabling young people to remain close to, and retain links with, their residential home after the age of 18 years. Early results from the use of the service indicates improved outcomes. Nevertheless, sufficiency of accommodation for care leavers remains a challenge. Senior leaders are appropriately focused on expanding provision, but not all care leavers have enough choice about their move-on accommodation. This is a continued area of development for the local authority.

29. Managers are aware that employment, education and training rates for care leavers are too low. A dedicated progression adviser is proactive in increasing opportunities for young people to develop employment-ready skills.

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

30. The local authority has made sustained improvements to the quality of services to children and families since its last inspection in 2014. Senior leaders and elected members are ambitious about improving outcomes for children. Strong governance arrangements ensure effective prioritisation to improve the well-being, safety and outcomes of children in the city. Corporate commitment to children's services is evident, backed up by financial support for delivery of core services and to drive improvements.
31. Led by the director of children's services (DCS), senior leaders have established strong relationships with each other. Partnerships at both strategic and operational levels are strong. Consequently, risks are shared across the partnership, and strengths and weaknesses are understood. The local authority has a positive relationship with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and a good reputation with the local judiciary. Applications for court orders are timely and social work statements are of a high quality. This helps to secure early permanence for children.
32. The local authority's approach to improvement is reflective and systematic. Senior leaders have built an impressive quality assurance system. Performance management information and audit activity provides leaders with a good knowledge and understanding of social work practice. Quality assurance activity is rigorous in highlighting strengths and weaknesses. Areas for development are systematically responded to, leading to timely action and improved performance. This is evidenced in various areas of practice, including, for example, the work on chronologies, which has had a real impact in respect of the completion and quality of these important tools.
33. Quality assurance activity was effective in identifying performance issues in the children with disabilities team. Although initial action to respond to the identified concerns was decisive, including transfer of the service back under

children's services leadership, subsequent action was not. The leadership team recognised this shortfall and took immediate action to progress the action plan while the inspection was underway.

34. A strong focus on performance management continuously drives improvement. The chief executive and lead member receive informative quarterly reports on the performance of children's services. Managers use daily performance reports effectively in their teams. As a result, assessments and visits to children are timely, purposeful and proportionate to children's needs
35. The implementation of a set of practice standards has embedded some consistency of practice across the service. As a result, families are clear about the reason for social care intervention, and children are consistently supported to share their views.
36. The children's trust partnership board and the DCS have been instrumental in driving a service restructure, which now places the targeted early help service under the auspice of the 'Stronger Futures' programme. The co-location of multi-agency professionals in accessible localities facilitates children and families, who now receive a seamless and effective service.
37. Partnership working is well established, with a shared vision of supporting vulnerable children and families living in the most deprived wards of the city. This has led to jointly commissioned arrangements, for example the recent launch of the targeted enhanced child health offer, which has already provided an enhanced health visiting service to over 700 children.
38. There has been concerted effort across the partnership to ensure a joined-up response to children who are vulnerable to exploitation and those who go missing. The local strategic response to child sexual exploitation and children who go missing is informed by a comprehensive analysis and a strong commitment to educating the local community to be able to spot signs of abuse.
39. Senior leaders and the virtual headteacher are acutely aware that unauthorised absence is a persistent challenge and they have made improving attendance a top priority. A caseworker has been appointed to focus on the problem. Most children's attendance improves to some degree when they become looked after. However, unauthorised absence remains a challenge for the local authority.
40. Corporate parenting has been strengthened. A relaunched strategy ensures that priorities are appropriate for the future. The corporate parenting board is well attended and effective, with a strong commitment from a range of political, corporate and operational members. The board receives regular performance information and detailed reports. This provides good insight into

of the quality of service provided to children in care and care leavers in Portsmouth. Nevertheless, there needs to be great strategic drive to tackle stubborn issues such as unauthorised school absence and sufficiency of accommodation for care leavers.

41. The local authority has taken the right steps to attract and retain staff at all levels, including newly qualified social workers, who are well supported through their assessed and supported year in employment. Senior managers monitor workloads to ensure that they are maintained at manageable levels. Where they are not, additional agency staff are recruited. Social workers and managers have good access to opportunities for further development through the well-regarded 'Stronger Futures' academy.
42. Staff report that they are well supported and are positive about working in Portsmouth. Morale across the workforce is good. There are some good examples of analytical and reflective supervision, which helps social workers to work effectively with complex families. Management oversight is evident on the majority of children's case records. However, not all supervision and management oversight, including that of child protection conference chairs, consistently ensures that children's plans are progressed without delay.



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