

Salford

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 8 October to 12 October 2018

Lead inspector: Lorna Schlechte
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

Since the last inspection, children have continued to receive focused, timely and proportionate support in response to their needs and level of risk. Multi-agency arrangements for children are effective and these lead to a good range of interventions that keep children safe. The quality and impact of social work practice with children has been maintained and, in some areas, has improved.

The jointly funded early help offer is comprehensive and is delivered well from four integrated locality-based hubs. There is a strong partnership commitment at the 'front door', where escalating concerns about children are responded to promptly. Assessments of need are of good quality and new multi-agency initiatives help support the most vulnerable children and families, including those at risk of exploitation.

Children in care and care leavers receive a very good service. There is a caring approach towards children from social workers and managers, and children benefit from stable relationships with trusted adults. There is an effective focus on improving children's outcomes and, where appropriate, children return home to their families at the right time. Adoption services have significantly improved.

Care leavers receive high-quality, bespoke support that encourages them to reach their full potential.

Senior leaders and managers are focused and creative in finding solutions which improve the lives of children and families in the city. They fully understand the needs and challenges of local communities and have developed strong partnership arrangements to deliver services. They have acted on learning from peer reviews and inspections and are keen to embrace new ways of working. This is linked to a clear understanding of children's experiences in a challenging city environment. The workforce is well supported and positive about working for this local authority, despite high caseloads in some teams.

What needs to improve

- The quality and clarity of plans to measure progress.
- The quality of recording in relation to home visits and direct work with children and families.
- Challenge of avoidable delay by independent reviewing officers (IROs).
- The timeliness of response to children who are living in neglectful circumstances.

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

1. Early help arrangements are very effective in supporting children and families at the right time. The early help offer is well embedded and clearly defined, based on an integrated asset-based approach. This has led to the implementation of early help locality hubs across the city, which respond promptly and comprehensively to children's emerging needs and vulnerabilities. Early help assessments are detailed, and plans are appropriately focused to meet children's needs. This leads to timely interventions that improve children's circumstances.
2. The early response team provides swift and targeted early help and support for children and their families when a case does not meet the threshold for social care intervention. For many families, this support has helped to meet children's needs and the concerns have reduced. However, at the time of this inspection the support was not informed by a holistic assessment of children's needs, and cases that were stepped up from this team were not managed through the usual robust referral process. Senior leaders addressed these issues effectively when they were raised during this inspection and the action taken provided assurance that this part of the service has been strengthened.

3. The bridge, the local authority's front door team, provides an effective, accessible single point of contact to children's social care and a wide range of other agencies, resources and support. There is strong partnership engagement, evidenced by the partners who are co-located within the bridge, including police, housing, health and CAMHS. Adolescents who have challenging behaviours receive a specialist and solution-focused response from the 'family on track' team, which is co-located in the bridge. There is clear identification and strong oversight of children who are missing education or whose parents have elected to home educate their children. Robust multi-agency procedures are in place to support professionals to recognise vulnerability, and there are strong links with missing from home coordinators. A wide range of quality assured alternative provision is available for children assessed as needing it. The impact of this is not yet fully known as outcomes and destination data has not previously been gathered. Leaders are appropriately aware that this is a key improvement priority.
4. Thresholds in response to referrals are consistently applied, supported by good management oversight and decision-making. Each referral is appropriately rag-rated (red, amber, green-rated) to ensure that there is a tailored and timely response. Although the quality of referral information is variable, an effective screening and information-sharing system leads to a swift transfer of cases to the duty and assessment team (DAT) as soon as it has been determined that a social work assessment is required. Information-sharing continues in the DAT, with clear management direction in response to identified risk and harm. This means that most children receive the right help at the right time.
5. When children are at risk of immediate harm, multi-agency information sharing is prompt and focused, and leads to timely strategy discussions. Strategy discussions identify risk and protective factors, using a well-known practice model, and appropriate decisions are made to keep children safe. However, in some cases, health information is not shared, either before or during strategy meetings. Child protection enquiries are timely and effective; they lead to clear decisions about risks to children.
6. Children's assessments are timely and of good quality. Assessments are thorough. They identify risk and need, are strength-based and routinely updated. They provide a clear rationale for next steps and the child and family's history are also explored. The views of children and parents are included, and these views inform appropriate decision-making that reduces risk to children. Social workers use a variety of direct work methods to understand the lived experience of the child. The contextual information in relation to gang culture, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health problems is well understood and is captured in the assessment.

7. Children's plans are up to date and informed by detailed assessments. The quality of plans is variable, and outcomes and actions are sometimes too vague. Although written agreements and safety plans are completed on most cases, it is not always clear that these are helpful to parents in understanding what needs to be done next, by whom, or by when, or that these plans lead to reduced risk for children. Therefore, it is often not possible to accurately measure the impact of interventions completed with families.
8. Multi-agency partnerships are strong in Salford. Child protection conferences are effective multi-agency forums, where information is shared and there is robust consideration of risk using the local practice model principles. Initial and review child protection conferences are also extremely timely and are attended by the relevant professionals from partner agencies, including health services. Children with child protection plans have access to advocacy support when required. When there is the possibility of a repeat child protection plan within a 12-month period, reflective meetings are facilitated by senior managers with child protection conference chairs to understand the rationale for a return to conference. Social workers complete an updated assessment to inform the conference. Updated assessments are also undertaken prior to a case being stepped down from a child protection plan. Through these assessments, careful consideration is given to the impact of parental behaviours on children. When children's cases are stepped down to child in need, support is focused and lasts a sufficient duration to ensure that progress can be sustained.
9. When children's circumstances do not improve sufficiently, there is appropriate escalation to legal planning meetings and pre-proceedings, which are tracked and monitored effectively. Pre-proceedings are used appropriately to complete specialist assessments and undertake family group conferences prior to the initiation of care applications. Focused outreach support is provided to families to help them to make the necessary changes. Children are seen by social workers regularly and there is a strong culture of child-centred practice where children's needs are well understood and responded to. This leads to strong and coordinated interventions with partner agencies. However, visits and direct work are not always recorded in a timely way.
10. An established parenting programme continues to deliver intensive parenting support to parents who have had repeat removal of children in recurrent care proceedings. The programme provides support for the first five years of a child's life and the outcomes for children and their parents are very positive, with 70% of children remaining with their family. As such, Salford is now leading an innovation programme-funded initiative to roll out the programme across Greater Manchester, in conjunction with a national provider.
11. The response to neglect requires improvement. The local authority's neglect tool is not consistently used to good effect by social workers or partners. This sometimes leads to delays in escalating concerns about children who

experience inconsistent and neglectful parenting. Senior leaders are aware of this and have a plan in place to sharpen management oversight through existing multi-agency escalation meetings in early help and a recently revised management alert system for child protection conference chairs.

12. Children with specific vulnerabilities, such as children missing from home and those at risk of exploitation, receive a strong and effective service. A designated worker triages all missing from home episodes. This ensures that detailed information-sharing takes place with partners at a weekly missing from home panel. Return home interviews are thorough and timely and inform children's plans. Children at risk of exploitation and organised gangs benefit from focused and creative support. A new complex safeguarding hub, established in collaboration with the police and a third sector provider, completes focused joint visits and direct work with children and families. Contextual information is used appropriately in this hub to understand risk to children and to identify their support needs.
13. In response to learning from a serious case review, the young person's plan (YPP) was piloted for children at risk of exploitation and harm from outside their family unit. The aim is to engage older young people who would otherwise be subject to a child protection plan in a more tailored intervention designed to keep them safe. Meetings are given the same status as a child protection plan within the local authority, and sometimes take place in the child's house to encourage engagement. Plans are regularly reviewed by YPP coordinators. An initial evaluation of the pilot has shown that engagement of young people has increased, leading to improved outcomes for some children. The local authority has appropriately identified that further refinement is required, for example in updating risk assessments, and a full evaluation is planned for December 2018.
14. There is less effective practice in the children with disabilities team. Assessments of children's needs are not consistently thorough, and some plans are overly focused on the child's disability. The local authority had already put in place additional management oversight through the recruitment of an additional team manager post prior to this inspection to drive forward improvement in this area. This is beginning to provide more focused scrutiny of children's assessments, plans and interventions in this team.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good

15. Children in care and care leavers receive a good service in Salford. When children enter care, they benefit from the support of a stable and experienced social work team. They come into care at the right time, following decisions that are based on the child's assessed needs. Children are cared about by

their social workers and are seen regularly. They are supported to build positive relationships with social workers and their wishes and feelings are well understood because of the direct work undertaken with them. Recording of these visits and direct work sessions is not always timely. Children are provided with additional practical and intensive support by a team of support workers, and children's changing needs are responded to quickly.

16. When children are unable to remain with their families and cases progress to court, the quality of social work evidence is of a good standard. This supports timely permanence planning for children, with most care proceedings concluding in an average of 27 weeks. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) are positive about the level of social work expertise in Salford and report positive relationships with senior leaders.
17. Children in care benefit from good quality assessments. This leads to care plans for children that are fully informed by a detailed assessment of need. Plans identify routes to permanence and outline how this is going to be achieved in a timely manner. There is robust management oversight of permanence planning through a regular permanence tracking meeting. This helps keep plans on track for the most vulnerable children. When the plan is for children to return home, additional support is provided to secure good outcomes. When plans change, children do not always have a prompt re-assessment of their needs. The work completed on the child's case record is not always recorded quickly enough.
18. Since the last inspection, an effective 'discharge from care' team has been established. Through their careful work with children and their families, this team ensures that care orders are removed for children who are placed with their parents when it is safe and appropriate to do so. To date, the team has successfully discharged 71 children from care who are living with parents and wider family, with 53 progressing to a special guardianship order (SGO). The team tracks children placed at home and provides social work support to complete relevant applications. Consequently, repeat entries into care have been avoided.
19. Almost all children participate in their reviews, and their wishes and feelings are listened to and influence care planning. Reviews are timely and there is evidence of a management alert system used by IROs to raise concerns about planning if this is appropriate. However, the IRO footprint is not always visible on the child's case record. Recommendations are not always implemented quickly enough and IROs do not always challenge delay with sufficient rigour.
20. Children's voices are listened to and their comments are acted on by senior leaders. Children have access to advocacy support and independent visitors when needed. Free gym memberships are available for all children in care and care leavers over 14 years old. There are regular celebration events for children in care and Fight for Change (the Children in Care Council) is consulted. The group has influence and its voice is clearly heard. For

example, Fight for Change has worked alongside Salford University to consider the emotional well-being of children who are new into care. This has led to a revised and improved screening process for each child after six weeks in care, using the strengths and difficulties questionnaire toolkit to identify need.

21. Children are signposted to timely and bespoke support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The STARLAC team continues to provide a range of support and interventions for children and their carers to ensure that children's emotional vulnerabilities are addressed early on in placement. Children also have their health promoted through regular physical health and dental checks. The focus on children's emotional health needs in Salford is a notable area of strength.
22. There is a strong and well-organised virtual school. A restructure of the team has led to a clearer focus on key objectives. There has been a significant improvement in children's personal education plans. These are reviewed regularly, are of good quality, and lead to timely and bespoke support. There is a wide range of training and support on offer for all stakeholders. As a result, some children's outcomes in their early and primary school years have improved. Further improvement is required for key stage 4 pupils, including engagement and attendance, and detailed plans are in place to address this.
23. Most children benefit from safe and settled placements and live with local foster carers. However, long-term stability is below the local authority's current target measures and national and statistical neighbour performance. Recruitment of new foster carers is a challenge for the local authority. A recruitment officer has been appointed in the fostering service to drive forward an action plan to increase the pool of in-house carers, although it is too early to know if this will make a significant impact on foster carer resources.
24. Foster carers are recruited, assessed and trained effectively. Well-written and evaluative assessments, with comprehensive analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities of applicants, ensure that their skills and experiences are carefully evaluated in order to identify their training and support needs. Foster carers are regularly supervised and supported through peer support groups and a buddy system.
25. Children who have high support needs benefit from a bespoke wrap-around service from a wide range of professionals and are provided with specialist placements through the 'focus foster care' team. This includes a therapeutic social worker, education officer and support worker, who provide timely and targeted support. Placement stability is positive for these children with almost half remaining with their carers after two years.

26. There has been a much sharper strategic focus on adoption, and this has led to significant improvements in the timeliness and quality of adoption services since the last inspection. Decision-making about children who would benefit from a plan of adoption is clear and well considered. Senior managers have introduced an adoption tracker which enables managers to efficiently maintain oversight of permanence plans, life-story work and later-life letters. The adoption manager attends legal planning meetings and flags cases of early permanence appropriately. This includes early consideration of concurrent planning and foster-to-adopt placements for relevant children. Children are placed with adopters who have been appropriately recruited, trained and assessed by the regional adoption agency, Adoption Counts, which went fully live in October 2017. Children placed for adoption are given appropriate and effective post-adoption support. Salford's approach has informed a shared pilot to develop adoption support into a centre of excellence. It was too early to evidence any impact of this during the inspection.
27. Care leavers receive an impressive service. A stable staff team builds strong relationships with young people. Focused work takes place to meet young people's needs in relation to health, housing, education, leisure and family contact. All 16- to 18-year-olds are allocated a social worker who often remains with them post-18. A corporate parenting officer, a recovery coach and tenancy support workers complement the role of social workers in the next step team. Care leavers are made aware of their rights and entitlements at the point of transition. This enables young people to readily access appropriate support services as and when they need them.
28. Staff in the leaving care service are considerate and caring people who are responsive to the changing needs of the young people they work with. Contact is maintained at a very high level, and the team is responsive when young people need additional help and support. Work with young people is set at a pace that is right for them. Young people are supported to develop independent living skills such as cookery, budgeting and working with others. Young people are provided with key documents and they all receive their health history. They are supported to apply for accreditation schemes, which then lead to further opportunities and potential employment for some young people.
29. Pathway plans are used as an effective working document with young people. Although they are lengthy, young people have their needs thoroughly recorded. Pathway plans are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that actions are complete. When young people experience change, the review of their pathway plan is brought forward, so that their needs can be reconsidered swiftly.
30. Almost all young people are provided with suitable accommodation, including a supported tenancy scheme for care leavers aged 16–25. The service

provides practical support in relation to housing benefits and budgeting for those young people who wish to live independently. Salford has waived council tax for care leavers up to the age of 21, which has taken away an additional financial pressure. There is also a recognition that not all young people are ready to live independently at 18; there are currently 24 care leavers who continue to receive the support of foster carers through staying-put arrangements.

31. The large majority of care leavers are engaged in education, employment and training and this is supporting them to develop and achieve. Young people who misuse drugs and alcohol are provided with immediate access to specialist support and are screened each year to ensure that the right support is in place. However, young people sometimes experience delay in accessing adult mental health provision.

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

32. Strategic leadership is strong, stable and effective. The director of children's services (DCS) and her senior managers maintain an up-to-date understanding of the quality of social work practice, children's experiences and the challenges of working in Salford. The chief executive officer (CEO) and lead member have appropriate mechanisms in place to hold senior leaders to account. This has resulted in a leadership team that knows itself well, responds proactively to feedback from a peer review processes and strongly supports regional sector improvement.
33. Leaders maintain a continuous focus on improvement in Salford, and they are keen to explore alternative ways of working with children and families. This is based on a thorough understanding of where practice needs to be strengthened. Digital systems at the front door are not sufficiently streamlined and can be time-consuming for staff to navigate. Leaders were aware of this issue prior to this inspection and are in the process of confirming additional funding to procure a more efficient system. In addition, a very recent child in need (CIN) pilot is currently underway, locating a team of social workers within an early help locality hub. The pilot has been set up in response to performance and case review learning, which highlighted a need to reduce the length of time children spent on CIN plans. The local authority appropriately plans to work with partners to improve the quality of referrals about children to the bridge.
34. Leaders ensure that there are strong partnership arrangements in place across the city, based on a detailed understanding of the needs of local communities. This includes some creative approaches to joint commissioning with the clinical commissioning group (CCG) to deliver the clear vision of

developing more integrated working in accordance with the local 0–25 transformation agenda. This, in turn, has led to additional investment, including joint funding to deliver the early help locality hub model. Close working with the police on child exploitation has led to the development of a new 'complex safeguarding hub', which is used to find new ways of working with children at risk of exploitation and gangs. The joint targeted area inspection on domestic abuse in 2016 prompted the creation of a detailed multi-agency action plan overseen by the community safety partnership. This led to an increased focus on safety planning, training and the recent commissioning of services for perpetrators. Strategic planning is complemented by strong political support in the council, which has recognised the challenges of social work practice in the city, particularly in relation to organised crime, domestic abuse and neglect.

35. The DCS, CEO, lead member and senior managers have successfully delivered against a strong commitment to embed learning, communicate with the workforce and encourage improvement. Training and development opportunities are carefully monitored, and staff have access to a wide range of training opportunities. Supervision is timely, although very task focused, with limited reflection being recorded. Newly qualified social workers receive a good level of support and benefit from protected caseloads. This is further enhanced by the close links with the Greater Manchester social work academy and Salford University. The university has evaluated specific areas of social work practice, such as the implementation of the local model of practice, which has then informed practice development across the service. Senior leaders responded promptly and effectively to issues raised during this inspection. This demonstrated leaders' responsive and solution-focused approach to developing services and strengthening practice and services.
36. The local authority has established a range of well-embedded initiatives to recruit and retain social workers, with appropriate plans and strategies in place to recruit agency staff to fill vacant posts. Social workers told inspectors that they feel supported and share a genuine pride in their role within the local authority. Senior leaders are visible, accessible and supportive to teams, encouraging attendance at regular 'lunch bowl' sessions to explore practice issues.
37. Senior leaders are caring corporate parents and have committed to clear strategic priorities to promote good outcomes for children in care. The corporate parenting board meets regularly with Fight for Change (the Children in Care Council), and responds appropriately to their priorities. Leaders fully understand the emotional impact on children when they enter care. As a result, they have secured ongoing investment of services such as STARLAC and the expansion of the virtual school.
38. There is a comprehensive system of quality assurance. This includes a detailed programme of multi-agency thematic audits, direct observation of

practice and multi-agency focus groups to explore learning. Detailed reports and action plans from these activities have led to positive changes in practice and commissioning of bespoke training, such as critical analysis training to improve the quality of assessments. Managers' quality assurance of audit activity has appropriately identified that some areas of audit practice need to be strengthened, including the need for clearer analysis of performance data. Performance information is regularly scrutinised at monthly performance monitoring group meetings and this has informed the priorities for auditing activity. This group, with attendance from colleagues in the CCG, also maintains effective overview of the performance improvement plans that result from quality assurance activity.

39. There is careful monitoring of workloads. Caseloads remain too high in some teams, although additional funding for five extra posts has been secured. Senior managers maintain a clear focus on workload, capacity and have successfully established a supportive culture in which learning and good social work practice thrive.



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