

Plymouth City Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 29 October 2018 to 9 November 2018

**Lead inspector: Nicola Bennett
Her Majesty’s Inspector**

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

Since the single inspection framework (SIF) inspection in 2014 and the focused visit in 2018, senior leaders have taken clear action to improve the quality of social work practice, and the vast majority of children, young people and families in Plymouth get the right help at the right time. There is a clear commitment to and corporate ownership of children’s services, as well as effective strategic partnerships that are well developed. Senior leaders have a good understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. There has been significant progress in establishing an environment in which good social work can flourish by significantly reducing social workers’ workloads, increasing management capacity and providing a wide range of learning and development opportunities.

Significant practice improvements are evident in a number of areas previously identified as weak. The quality of assessments of children’s needs has improved substantially and the quality assurance of practice by independent reviewing officers (IROs) and child protection conference chairs is well established and

effective. Strategy discussions to consider whether children are suffering or at risk of significant harm are routinely attended by agency partners.

The vast majority of children in foster care live in stable, suitable homes that meet their needs, and they make good progress. However, despite comprehensive commissioning activity, there are not enough local, family-based placements to meet the needs of some children. The local authority is in touch with almost all of its care leavers, the majority of whom live in appropriate accommodation and receive a good level of support. While the quality of written records of plans and records of management supervision is not consistently good, this does not lead to delay, and outcomes for children and young people across the range of children's services are improving. However, there are areas of weaker practice that are yet to be addressed and the pace of change to improve services such as the care leavers' service, as well as to improve the quality of management oversight and supervision, which were identified as areas for improvement in the last inspection, has been too slow.

What needs to improve

- The quality of strategy discussions, including records of decision-making and action plans.
- The quality of written plans.
- Sufficiency of local placements to meet the needs of older children.
- The quality of recording of supervision and management oversight.
- The quality of services to care leavers, including education, employment and training opportunities.
- The quality of and learning from auditing of casework.

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

1. Since the last inspection in 2014, Plymouth council has developed a wide range of early help and targeted services to strengthen parenting capacity and build resilience in families. Where families access targeted programmes, this is making a positive difference to children's lives. Thresholds are well understood and where children's needs change or risks increase, professionals refer promptly to children's social care. However, the local authority has not yet embedded systems to measure the quality and impact of early help services. As a result, it is not yet able to accurately measure the difference that these services are making in improving children's circumstances or in reducing the need for targeted or specialist services.
2. The local authority reconfigured its contact and referral services on 10 September 2018, bringing together the Gateway service and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Since the restructure, unqualified workers in the gateway service have been making day-to-day decisions regarding contacts from professionals, members of the public or family members, overseen by a qualified social work practitioner. However, capacity issues in this service mean that it is not possible for all decisions made by unqualified workers to be checked by the practitioner. In a small number of cases seen by inspectors, thresholds of need have not been consistently understood and applied, leading to missed opportunities to intervene early before children's circumstances deteriorate. Current systems to ensure that all work coming into the MASH is reviewed and responded to in a timely way are not sufficiently rigorous. As a result, a small number of children have been left in circumstances of unassessed risk for too long. During the inspection, senior leaders undertook a review of the Gateway service and MASH and took swift action to address shortfalls identified by inspectors.
3. Where risks are clearly evidenced at the point of contact, the Gateway service and MASH take appropriate and timely action. Thresholds are appropriately applied by referring partners, and strategy discussions take place in a timely manner and are generally well attended by professionals with good information-sharing. When there is a clear risk, actions arising out of strategy discussions are timely and proportionate. However, when risks to children are less evident, decisions to undertake child protection enquiries without a clear analysis of risk of harm result in too many families being unnecessarily subject to child protection enquiries.
4. Child protection enquiries undertaken in the Plymouth referral and assessment service (PRAS) are concluded in a timely manner. As part of these enquiries, children are routinely seen and spoken to by social workers, who carefully consider the risks and needs of individual children and correctly apply thresholds. The vast majority of assessments of children in need of help or protection are of good quality and are completed within national timescales, and the local

authority has introduced checks on progress with assessments to increase the numbers completed at 10 and 30 days. However, assessments are not always completed within timescales that reflect children's circumstances. Assessments are comprehensive and include good analysis, children's experiences are clearly captured, and assessments clearly identify next steps to improve children's experiences.

5. Social workers know their children well, see them regularly and build effective relationships with both children and families to support effective interventions and positive outcomes. Inspectors saw numerous examples of purposeful and creative direct work, as well as the use of a variety of tools and techniques to sensitively explore the feelings of children and young people.
6. Child in need and child protection plans are developed in a timely manner in response to needs identified. However, they are not yet consistently good. Plans do not always make it clear who is going to do what by when or why, making it difficult to measure progress or to hold professionals and parents to account. Changes and improvements in children's circumstances do not always lead to the updating of plans, and very few include an explicit contingency plan, making it difficult to measure progress in addressing identified risks or needs or to take timely action where children's circumstances do not improve. Although written plans vary in quality, social work practice demonstrates clarity of purpose and effective interventions, leading to improvements in children's circumstances as a result.
7. Initial and review child protection conferences, core groups and child in need meetings are well attended by agency partners and families. Advocates are routinely offered to children and this service is taken up, maximising opportunities for children's views and experiences to be heard at conference. However, child in need reviews do not always take place in a timely way, leading to delay in progressing plans and outcomes for children in a small number of cases. While professionals are involved in key decision-making, planning and review, the difference that they make to progressing plans is often not clear. The local authority has recently introduced a strengths-based model for child protection conferences. However, the impact of this on improving outcomes for children is yet to be seen.
8. Currently, the local authority does not effectively use the pre-proceedings process as part of the Public Law Outline, and, as a result, not all parents are provided with sufficient opportunity to demonstrate sustained improvement in the care they provide prior to care proceedings commencing. Where the pre-proceedings process is appropriately instigated, letters before proceedings seen by inspectors set out clearly the concerns, support provided to assist parents and timescales for positive change. This enables parents to understand what is expected of them and within what timescale it is expected.

9. Social workers spoken to by inspectors report being well supported in their teams and by managers, and that they have good access to advice and supervision. However, supervision does not always take place regularly, records are not of consistently good quality and management oversight is not well captured in children's records. This makes it difficult to track decision-making, measure progress for children, and, where there is delay, to identify and address this. However, despite these deficits, in the vast majority of cases children's plans are progressed within a timescale that meets their needs.
10. Thoughtful, early planning in the children's disability team ensures that all children in need of help and protection and in care receive coordinated and bespoke services, and early planning results in a smooth transition to adult services. Creative direct work is undertaken to build children's confidence and resilience, to promote independence and to enable young people to achieve their ambitions. Risks are identified and responded to in a timely way, and well-considered assessments result in clear plans to meet children's needs.
11. Services to identify children who are privately fostered are under developed. The local authority has not actively raised awareness of private fostering across the partnership. As a result, current numbers of private fostering arrangements other than those arising from the local language school are low. However, children who are identified as privately fostered receive a thorough assessment of need.
12. Following the focused visit, which considered the local authority's arrangements at the first point of contact for children who need help and protection, the local authority has developed a clear protocol for responding to young people who present as homeless. As a result, each young person receives a thorough assessment of need and an appropriate level of support and intervention.
13. Records of return home interviews for children who have gone missing from home or from care have improved significantly since the last inspection and are now detailed, with consideration given to vulnerabilities and risk as well as reflecting the views of child. However, they are not consistently undertaken, completed or authorised in a timely manner. As a result, they do not always inform planning to reduce risk to the child.
14. The issue of children missing education is given appropriate emphasis. There are well-established procedures to identify, track and reduce the number of children who are missing education or who are at risk of doing so. As a result, the number of children at risk of missing from education has reduced. There is effective oversight, tracking and risk assessment of children who are electively home educated. When risk to children who are electively home educated is identified, effective and proportionate action is taken.

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

15. The vast majority of children in care receive a good service. Social workers engage effectively with professionals and families in order to support children to remain with their families where it is safe for them to do so. Where this is not possible, timely decisions are taken for children to come into care.
16. Thresholds for care proceedings are well understood and appropriately applied. Care proceedings are timely, and children benefit from early and well-considered planning for permanence. However, the quality of social work assessments in care proceedings is not consistently good. Stronger assessments include clear analysis and recommendations linked to identified risks, current and future needs of the child.
17. For other children in care, assessments are routinely updated, thorough and of a good standard. The strengths and aspirations of children are captured, and careful consideration is given to long-term permanence options, including with brothers or sisters, as well as to maintenance of contact with family members and other people who are important to them.
18. Children in care reviews take place regularly and are well attended by agency professionals. There is good use of advocacy, parents are appropriately involved, and children's needs and experiences are central to discussions and planning. However, the quality of children's care plans remains variable. It is not consistently recorded who is responsible for completing actions, when these actions are to be completed by, or how progress is to be measured. Plans are not always updated to reflect discussions and actions agreed in reviews, and contingency planning is absent. In a small number of cases, minutes from reviews have not been distributed in a timely way. Social workers are addressing identified needs and progressing actions and children's circumstances are improving as a result. However, there is variability in the quality of written records. In addition, planning for a small number of older teenagers lacks clear direction, and, for these young people, the progression of actions to improve their broader needs in terms of health, education and emotional support has become secondary to crisis-driven responses.
19. The majority of children live in stable, suitable placements that are meeting their needs. However, despite clear commissioning strategies, there are not enough family-based placements in the local authority's own resources or through external providers to meet all children's needs. Due to a lack of suitable placement choice, careful matching is not always possible when children first come into care or when they are changing placements. This is particularly the case for older children, a small number of whom are in placements that are not meeting their needs.

20. Social workers have developed positive relationships with children in care and know them well. Children in care are visited regularly and their voices and experiences are captured effectively in order to inform planning. When children return home, there is good engagement of family members, and appropriate plans are in place to maximise the success of this and mitigate any risks. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported, with effective engagement of young people to assist them to work towards independence and help them into employment, education or training.
21. When adoption is the plan for children, they receive an effective and timely service and the individual needs of brothers and sisters are carefully considered. Children's permanence reports are thorough. Contact arrangements are thoughtful and well managed. Family-finding and matching are effective for these children, who achieve permanence without delay.
22. Assessments of prospective foster carers are comprehensive. However, reports on prospective adopters, while comprehensive, are not consistently analytical or evaluative. Both the fostering and adoption panels make timely and appropriate recommendations. Training for foster carers, special guardians and adopters is thorough. Foster carers are positive about both the training they receive and the support provided by social workers. However, not all adopters spoken to felt adequately supported when difficulties arose.
23. Currently, there are not enough adopters or foster to adopt placements. However, the local authority recently became part of a regional adoption agency, Adoption South West, which it anticipates will provide the opportunity to increase the numbers of prospective adopters available for children.
24. There is a good range of support services available to adoptive carers, and support plans are suitably considered and ensure access to necessary practical and financial support. Children's views and experiences are captured effectively, and direct work helps prepare children for adoption and to understand their histories through life-story work and later-life letters.
25. Virtual school leaders provide strong strategic leadership and are effective in ensuring that children in care have every opportunity to make good progress and reach their potential. As a result, they have overseen a marked improvement in the quality of support that the virtual school gives to children in care and the schools or colleges they attend. The virtual school tracks effectively the progress that pupils make from their starting points, including from the moment they enter care and join the virtual school. This allows for more secure assessment of progress and evaluation of the contribution that going into care makes to improving children's education.
26. Education outcomes for children in care improved in 2018, albeit from a very low base. At key stage 2, while attainment is lower than average, the progress that pupils make from their starting points is now broadly in line with the national

average for all pupils in each of reading, writing and mathematics. Attainment at key stage 4 is also low for children in care, but it improved in 2018, as did the progress these pupils made. Progress at key stage 4 is now better than the average progress score for children in care nationally.

27. The virtual school has worked effectively with schools to improve the quality and effectiveness of personal education plans (PEPs), the vast majority of which now include meaningful, measurable targets that focus on what needs to happen next for the child to make progress. These are reviewed regularly, and targets are refined according to each pupil's emerging needs and the progress that they are making. Virtual school staff work well with schools to develop appropriate packages for each child, and there is effective and creative use of the pupil premium. As a result, the proportion of young people who are not in employment, education or training is beginning to decrease, although it is still high.
28. The majority of care leavers receive a good service and are in appropriate accommodation that is meeting their needs and level of independence. Personal advisers are highly committed. They are good at keeping in touch with young people and they undertake regular, purposeful visiting. Staff have an appropriate range of skills and experience, are well versed in housing protocols and benefits applications and have established good links with providers that help to support young people to make changes for themselves.
29. However, senior leaders recognise that, currently, caseloads of personal advisers are too high to consistently provide the best service to all care leavers. Personal advisers are not regularly receiving supervision, and training opportunities are not always accessible. Consequently, morale among personal advisers is low. In recognition of the challenges and service demands in the care leavers' service, the local authority has undertaken a strategic review and recent structural reorganisation of the service in order to improve the experiences of and outcomes for all care leavers, increase oversight of service delivery by social work qualified managers and to better support personal advisers. However, it is too soon to see the impact of these changes.
30. The quality of pathway plans is improving. However, they are not of consistently good quality, and are not regularly reviewed or updated when circumstances change. They are not always used effectively to progress actions to improve young people's circumstances. This was an area identified for improvement in the last inspection. However, despite this deficit, the quality of interventions and actions undertaken by personal advisers is improving the circumstances of and outcomes for care leavers.
31. Placement issues for a small number of care leavers are not effectively addressed, and delay in responding to these young people's immediate and longer-term needs means that their circumstances are not improving. A minority of young people are living in unstable situations, which is impacting negatively on

their emotional well-being. Following placement breakdowns and having exhausted suitable alternatives, the local authority has resorted to placing vulnerable young people in bed and breakfast accommodation. While the number of young people in this accommodation is small, it is an unacceptable regular pattern.

32. The local authority actively promotes 'staying put' arrangements with former foster carers. A high and increasing number of young people are benefiting from these arrangements, which provide them with longer-term stability and security. Increasingly, care leavers have access to their health histories and are aware of their rights and entitlements. They receive timely, targeted support to develop their independence skills. However, while the local authority recently developed the care leavers' pledge, it has not been widely promoted, and the care leavers' offer has yet to be finalised. Data indicates improvements in recent months of the percentage of care leavers in employment, education and training. However, for those young people who are not in any form of employment, education or training, opportunities to reach their full potential are limited.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

33. Since the last inspection and focused visit, senior leaders have undertaken an end-to-end review, redesign and restructuring of services in order to create sustainable, effective and improved services for children and their families. There is a shared joined-up approach and strong cross-party commitment to the delivery of effective children's services that is improving the experiences and outcomes for children and families in Plymouth. This has ensured continued financial assurance and commitment that has enabled successful implementation of a number of priority actions, such as the redesign of the contact and referral service and PRAS, increases in social work and management capacity and the creation of smaller teams to develop and embed practice improvements.
34. There are strong strategic partnerships and integrated commissioning arrangements, leading to a well-coordinated wide range of services to meet the needs of children and families. Good joint planning and service provision from health partners, such as emotional well-being services in schools, are providing help to children when need is first identified. Relationships between senior leaders and elected members are constructive, as well as critically challenging, and there is a shared understanding and prioritisation of service improvements. Strong strategic leadership by virtual school leaders is ensuring that children in care are provided with every opportunity to reach their educational potential.
35. Senior leaders are outward looking and have been successful in attracting innovative projects to continue to develop and improve services for children, such as a project to improve outcomes for care leavers. The local authority is also, in partnership with the NSPCC, establishing a pilot site for a place-based approach to preventing child sexual abuse. The local authority has worked

effectively with partner agencies such as the police and health services to successfully increase professional attendance and representation at key meetings such as conferences and reviews.

36. The local authority's self-assessment is accurate and clearly sets out progress and improvements in service provision and developments, as well as key priority areas for improvement. In reconfiguring and redesigning services, senior leaders have created solid foundations from which sustainable and increasingly high-quality services are being provided. However, they recognise that some areas identified for improvement in the last inspection, for example services to care leavers, have very recently been addressed and that there is still some work to be done to ensure that all children and young people receive consistently good services across all areas of practice and performance.
37. Auditing of casework takes place on a regular basis, but learning arising from findings is not well embedded or effectively contributing to service improvements. However, since the last inspection the quality assurance of casework and challenge provided by independent reviewing officers and child protection chairs has significantly improved. Caseloads are now manageable, and, with the establishment of a clear dispute resolution process, they now provide effective oversight and challenge, ensuring that children's plans are progressed in a timely way and outcomes that make a positive difference for children are achieved.
38. When children are considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation, there is timely and effective response. There has been concerted work across the partnership to ensure a joined-up response to children who are vulnerable to exploitation, and to children who go missing. Risks are well identified, and are supported by assessment tools, which have been strengthened. Missing and exploitation meetings effectively share intelligence, both at an operational and at a strategic level, to inform and take timely action to safeguard children in need of protection.
39. Action taken to improve the range and type of available placements has led to an increase in the number of locally based one- and two-bed children's homes. Commissioning work is being undertaken with neighbouring local authorities to increase the volume and variety of placements to better meet the needs of a changing care population. However, despite this key activity, and while the majority of children in care are living locally with foster carers, sufficiency of placements to meet the needs of older children and those with more complex needs remains a challenge, and long-term placement stability is declining.
40. Senior leaders place a priority on the participation of children in care who are involved in a variety of activities, such as the recruitment of prospective foster carers and managers. A 'junior listen and care council' has been established, and disabled children are provided with opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities. Council leaders are considering how to better support care leavers,

such as waiving council tax, prioritising care leavers for housing and developing work experience and apprenticeship opportunities in the council. The achievements of children in care are celebrated through annual events and other events positively promote the experiences of children in care.

41. Available performance information covers most areas of practice. Senior leaders have established a performance review framework and are using data to increase their grip on practice and performance. Regular meetings have been established with managers and these have been successful in increasing their understanding and developing a culture of ownership of performance. Managers have an accurate picture of the strengths and areas for improvement in their teams' practice. This has led to improvements in a number of areas, such as the timeliness and quality of assessments, capturing the voice and experiences of children and the frequency and regularity of social work visits. However, the same level of progress has not been achieved in all areas, such as the quality of written plans and recording of management oversight. Furthermore, data relating to the gateway service and MASH is not sufficiently rigorous, and, as a result, oversight of performance in this part of the service is not being effectively scrutinised.

42. Senior leaders have taken effective action to reduce caseloads and establish a permanent, suitably qualified and supported workforce. For the vast majority of social workers, caseloads are manageable, and morale is good. The local authority has invested in a professional development team which is supported by a comprehensive professional development programme and the establishment of the social work academy provides clear learning and career pathways. This has been successful in both attracting and retaining staff. As a result, social workers are developing meaningful relationships with children, and have the time and capacity to deliver purposeful and well-targeted interventions. The restructuring of teams and services and the establishment and embedding of practice standards have strengthened social work practice, and, as a result, children's experiences and circumstances are improving and positive outcomes for them are being achieved.



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