

Swindon

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 1 July 2019 to 12 July 2019

**Lead inspector: Emmy Tomsett
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	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

The determined and well-focused leadership of the director of children’s services (DCS), supported by corporate managers and elected members, has delivered significant improvement in children’s services in Swindon.

The DCS and his leadership team have taken swift and decisive action to improve services for children and young people in Swindon. Following the inspection of 2014, services declined, and the focused visit undertaken in 2018 found that services had deteriorated to a point where several areas for priority action were identified. The quality of leadership in Swindon is a key strength and has ensured the delivery of swift and well-targeted improvements across all areas of children’s services. The DCS and his team have been systematic and relentless in their efforts to drive developments in Swindon and acknowledge that evident improvements have been made from a low base.

The DCS and senior leaders are highly visible and dedicated in their commitment to improving experiences for children. The quality of services has significantly improved within the last 12 months. Services to respond to children in need of help and

protection are now good. Arrangements to facilitate the delivery of consistently good services for children in care are firmly in place. However, it is too soon to see the full impact of these more recent changes. While there is a determination to ensure that children achieve permanence in a timely way, the legacy of poor practice has had a negative impact on the experience of some children. A culture of learning and challenge has been fostered in Swindon by the now permanent senior leadership team, which has a tangible presence in all areas of the service. Increased financial investment has been well targeted, and this, along with persistence by leaders, has ensured that children's needs have been well considered and addressed. Senior leaders' oversight and commitment to the workforce have ensured that staff have had a clear understanding of the areas for improvement.

What needs to improve

- the extent to which plans for children, across the service, include clear, specific and timebound actions as well as contingency arrangements
- sufficiency of local placements to meet the needs of older children, as well as those children with complex needs
- the timeliness and quality of preparation of care leavers for independent living
- health histories, so that they are routinely available for all care leavers in a timely way.

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

1. The Swindon local authority early help offer has been strengthened to ensure that more children and families receive support through the newly created early help hub. Intervention by the hub is well targeted and is monitored effectively. Increased preventative services have reduced the number of children and families needing statutory support. Referrals to the early help hub are responded to in a timely and purposeful manner. Responses to children's needs are proportionate and delivered through well-coordinated plans by an increasing range of partners. There is a wide range of accessible multi-agency support services, including a single point of referral for mental health services, which undertake joint assessments to decide on levels of risk. Early help assessments are mostly of good quality, and the views of children are clearly represented. However, the quality of written plans is inconsistent and not all plans are sufficiently linked to the identified risks. The local authority has strengthened guidance for workers in order to improve consistency.
2. All areas for priority action from the focused visit in May 2018 have been addressed. Children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response to initial contacts made to the 'front door'. Thresholds are well understood and are

appropriately applied by the professionals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). The interface between the out-of-hours team and day teams is effective. Partnership working is a strength, with evidence of increased professional curiosity, timely background checks and information being shared effectively. For those children in need of statutory help, the response to referrals is now consistently thorough, and timely. Risks to children from domestic abuse are well understood, and there is an appropriate range of tools used to assess risks. Managers provide a detailed analysis of historical information, and actual and potential risks, and this is accompanied by coherent directives on next steps for social workers. Parental consent is considered appropriately, and when it is overridden, there is a clear, recorded rationale. Young people who present as homeless receive a swift response through well-coordinated joint assessments from housing and social care services.

3. Children are seen quickly by social workers, and as frequently as necessary, so that the risks and needs for the whole family can be thoroughly assessed. Children are seen alone and in appropriate venues to maximise the opportunity to build a trusting relationship and to enable social workers to understand the child's world. Social workers routinely undertake direct work with children to understand their world.
4. Child protection enquiries are effective and timely. Strategy meetings are held when risks are identified, and result in well-targeted action plans and proportionate decisions to best protect children. These are based on careful analysis of relevant historical information and information from partners, and appropriately consider the relevance to the presenting concerns. Child protection conferences are now timely, and appropriate partners attend these meetings.
5. Assessments are timely and comprehensive and completed with minimum delay. Risks and needs of children are carefully identified and lead to appropriate support for children and families. Social workers make good use of research to explain to parents why things need to change, pointing out the impact for their children if certain behaviours continue. Where risks are judged to be high and children are at risk of imminent harm, appropriate and immediate action is taken to safeguard and protect them.
6. The accessible and responsive family group conferencing service identifies members of the wider family to offer support to, or to be assessed as alternative temporary or permanent carers for, children. Increasing use of assessment tools with families, such as the 'graded care profile' to identify and understand the impact of neglect and the outcome and relationship-based approach, is increasing workers' confidence in analysing risk to children.
7. The quality of child in need and child protection plans is inconsistent. While planning for children is effective and well targeted, the actual written plan is not easily accessible or sufficiently clear. This weakness is further compounded by an electronic recording system that is difficult to navigate. As a result, social

workers are currently translating plans for parents to ensure that they fully understand the content. Senior leaders have undertaken significant activity to improve plans. However, this has not yet led to a consistent improvement for all children's plans. Plans are reviewed in a timely manner, and contingency planning is well embedded. The child's voice is well represented in both assessments and plans.

8. The focus on securing permanence for children has improved. The scrutiny and oversight of children subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO) are now ensuring that children do not experience drift and delay in securing permanence. A PLO tracker has been established and is well used by the newly appointed PLO coordinator in order to increase the management oversight of individual children's cases.
9. Disabled children in need of help and protection receive an effective and timely response to their needs from the point of referral. The quality of social work practice is of a consistently high standard. Children with the most complex needs receive a timely response to the right help, and families are supported to care for their children.
10. The local authority identifies and responds appropriately to private fostering arrangements. Assessments identify the risks well and are clearly informed by the parents' and children's views. Plans are reviewed and assessments are updated as required.
11. Responses to individual children identified as being at risk of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, are mostly timely and effective. Young people are well supported by the Opal team (the dedicated child exploitation team), which provides well-targeted preventative intervention and individual direct work with young people to reduce risk. Action plans mitigate risks and engage young people so that they can develop self-protection skills. Sexual exploitation risk assessment tools are completed to a high standard. Strategic arrangements to gather local intelligence contribute to local mapping, create a robust profile of the area and have significantly improved partnership working.
12. Arrangements to identify and support children who go missing have improved significantly. The appointment of a coordinator for missing children has led to improvements in the timeliness and quality of return home interviews. Strengthened arrangements have led to a significant reduction in the number of episodes of children going missing from home.
13. The number of children who are educated at home in Swindon has increased in the last 12 months. While these individual arrangements are monitored by the education welfare service, there is insufficient evidence of a strategic analysis and consequent action by leaders to understand this pattern locally. Senior leaders have strengthened these monitoring arrangements. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this work.

14. Arrangements to manage allegations against adults who work with children are timely, comprehensive and effective. Thresholds are well understood and consistently applied. Allegations management meetings are well attended and recorded. Multi-agency meetings ensure that information is shared effectively, and this results in well-coordinated and timebound action plans that protect children and ensure that investigations are thorough and purposeful. A newly implemented comprehensive tracking tool monitors the progress of individual investigations and prevents children from experiencing unnecessary delays.

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

15. The DCS has ensured that there is now a much sharper focus on the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers. However, improvement has been from a low base. A shortage of foster carers with the right mix of skills, knowledge and experience means that placement choice is limited, resulting in too many children in care living in placements out of area. Placement stability is a challenge. While there is renewed determination to ensure that children achieve permanence in a timely way, there are significant legacy issues. Some children have waited too long to be adopted.
16. Decisions to look after children are now mostly timely. While historically there has been evidence of drift and delay in children coming into care, there is now a clear focus on achieving permanence for children, and permanence plans are now in place for most children. The implementation of a permanence tracker is beginning to ensure that senior leaders can track individual children's progress. A full range of permanence options are well considered, including special guardianship orders, return home and adoption. The number of young people enjoying staying put arrangements has increased but remains low in proportion to the number of children in care.
17. Social workers see children regularly, including those children who live outside Swindon. Visits are purposeful and there is a clear focus on the lived experiences of children in care, and on their wishes and feelings. Social workers routinely undertake direct work with children that is helping children to make sense of their experiences and care histories. Children benefit from good-quality advocacy support. Arrangements for children to see their family are well considered and managed in a way that makes it possible for children to continue to see and spend time with those who matter most to them.
18. The quality of assessments of children, as well as assessments of together and apart and of viability, is good. Assessments routinely include a comprehensive analysis of risk and protective factors and a good consideration of the impact of historical events, particularly in cases where neglect is a feature. The quality of children's plans is inconsistent, but most plans are sufficiently detailed, with an increasing recent focus on permanence, and on children's progress in their

placement. Plans are reviewed regularly, but further work is required to ensure that they are routinely specific and measurable.

19. The role of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) has been strengthened, and their quality assurance function is now ensuring effective scrutiny and greater oversight of arrangements for children in care. Review timeliness has improved, and most children contribute to their reviews. Reviews are comprehensive and written directly to the child, making them easy for children to understand. IROs are making increased use of the dispute resolution process to challenge drift and delay.
20. Good attention is now paid to the health of children in care and most have up-to-date annual health assessments, dental checks and immunisations. The experience of those children who live more than 50 miles from Swindon is improving. Social workers are responsive to children's emotional well-being and mental health. The establishment of a multi-disciplinary strengths and difficulties panel and an increased focus on trauma mean that strengths and difficulties questionnaires are starting to be better used to understand children's needs.
21. The virtual school is effective in ensuring that children in care are well supported and make good progress in school. While children in care make less progress than their peers, the gap is reducing. The virtual school systematically monitors and evaluates the quality of personal education plans (PEPs), and, as a result, the quality of plans is improving. All PEPs have a clear focus on academic progress. The virtual school has been working with schools to reduce the number of children in care who are excluded from school. Work is in progress to improve school attendance of children in care in Swindon, which is lower than that of children in care in other local authorities.
22. Children are encouraged to develop hobbies and interests and take part in a range of social and leisure activities. The children in care team makes a conscious effort to celebrate children's birthdays and achievements. There are established groups for children in care and care leavers. However, attendance at these groups is limited. Senior leaders continue to ensure that all looked after children have an opportunity to attend, contribute and influence decision-making and changes to the service they receive.
23. Senior leaders recognise that Swindon has a shortage of foster carers with the right mix of skills, knowledge and experience, and that this has resulted in limited placement choice. A high number of children in care currently live in placements out of area. Placement stability in Swindon has been a challenge, and some children have moved because they have been living in placements that have not met their needs. Leaders have taken effective action to strengthen the recruitment, training and selection of foster carers.
24. Adoption arrangements have been recently strengthened, although this is not yet consistently benefiting children. While still working through Swindon's backlog of

children with placement orders, the regional adoption agency (Adoption Thames Valley) is starting to deliver well for Swindon children whose plan for permanence is adoption. Swindon children have been waiting longer than the national average to be adopted. This particularly applies to children living with long-term foster carers who want to adopt them. There is still evidence of delay, for example in some children being placed with adopters and in some children's existing foster placements being confirmed as permanence plans. The quality and timeliness of adoption support are improving.

25. The development of the dedicated care leavers team, coupled with increased staffing, has reduced personal advisers' (PAs) caseloads and improved the quality and impact of management oversight. The local authority is in touch with most care leavers. While services for young people have significantly improved, these are not yet of consistently good quality.
26. Children are swiftly allocated a PA, who works jointly with the allocated social worker to ensure that young people are now able to establish meaningful and sustained relationships with their PA. Young people, including those living out of area, are seen at least every four weeks and more frequently if required. The 'local offer' for care leavers is well-written and easy to understand. It clearly outlines what care leavers should expect and the services available to them and includes comprehensive information on health support services.
27. The quality of pathway plans, while improved since the focused visit, is variable. Pathway plans are not sufficiently specific or timebound, and when risks are identified, they do not fully reflect responses that are taking place to address risk and vulnerability. There is also little evidence of pathway plans being genuinely co-produced with young people. Care leavers spoken with report the length of the pathway planning templates as a barrier to meaningful involvement. A health passport has been developed in consultation with children in care, and although the situation is improving, too many care leavers do not have access to a comprehensive summary of their health histories.
28. While young people are prepared for independence, Swindon does not currently have a systematic process to ensure that young people are helped to develop their skills in preparation for adulthood. Building on an already strong and well-developed strategic and operational relationship with the housing department, senior leaders have introduced a housing and children's social care accommodation panel to strengthen their response to young people, including care leavers, who are at risk of becoming homeless. Most care leavers have access to a range of good-quality accommodation.

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

29. Following his appointment, the DCS recognised that the quality of practice in Swindon had declined following the inspection in 2014. Since then, however,

there has been significant improvement, and in the last 12 months, the DCS and his team have taken resolute action to improve the quality of services in Swindon. Decisive and well-targeted action has been taken to address all areas of weakness identified in focused visits in 2018 and 2019. The quality of practice in Swindon has significantly improved from a low base, and recently the pace of improvement has been swift and actions have been well targeted.

30. Governance arrangements have been strengthened, and a new chief executive and lead member have been appointed. Political leaders have ensured that there is corporate commitment across all directorates to the wider children's safeguarding agenda in Swindon. The Swindon strategic improvement pillar plan provides a clear strategic framework for delivering sustainable improvement to the experiences of children across the service. Good use has been made of peer support, partners in practice, external reviews and work with the safeguarding board. A learning culture is now fully embedded and peer challenge and escalation processes support continuous improvement.
31. The quality of leadership and management at all levels in Swindon is a key strength, and the senior leadership team is ambitious, energetic and assured in the oversight and delivery of services to children and their families. The senior management team is now permanent, with increased capacity to strengthen overall delivery of improved experiences for children. Senior leaders have demonstrated a good awareness of weaknesses, as well as strengths, in performance and the quality of practice. Improvements have now been sustained in most areas of practice.
32. There has been a significant increase in the financial investment in children's services. This has been effectively targeted and translated into a range of additional services and management capacity across the service. For example, additional posts include a strategic commissioner to increase the number of foster placements in Swindon, a child exploitation manager, a coordinator for missing children and a pre-proceedings scrutiny officer. Management capacity has been increased in several key areas, including in the MASH, locality teams and the care leavers team.
33. Improvements are notable in several key areas. Supervision and management oversight are now timely and purposeful, and are well documented in most case records. Caseloads have halved, and social workers and managers feel well supported and have access to a comprehensive range of well-targeted training opportunities. Staff morale is high and the DCS and senior leadership team are highly visible to all staff. Staff greatly value the practice week, when senior leaders join them in their daily work activities to gain an understanding of staff experiences and further monitor the quality of practice.
34. While significant improvements have been achieved across the service, a small number of areas for development remain. Services for children looked after, while much improved, require further improvement to be good. Senior leaders

had already identified all areas of weakness identified during this inspection. However, remedial action to address these is at varying stages of implementation, and outcomes are not yet consistently good for children in care in Swindon.

35. Social work stability over recent years has been a significant challenge in Swindon. While the number of agency staff is high at 63%, most of this cohort are long-term locums, and this has ensured that, more recently, children have enjoyed consistency of social worker. The local authority has updated its workforce development strategy, which clearly sets out its revised recruitment and retention strategies.
36. Workforce development has been a key priority for senior leaders, who have now established Swindon Social Work Academy. The academy provides a centralised hub to ensure that the training and development needs of staff are identified and that training is delivered well. Staff development is delivered well, and a revised framework has been implemented to ensure increased support and facilitate career and skills development opportunities for staff. A Swindon social work forum further strengthens the interface between senior leaders and frontline staff, and ensures that leaders are responsive to staff experiences and need. Senior leaders have also introduced a mandatory core training programme, and this includes agency staff.
37. Quality assurance arrangements have been significantly strengthened in Swindon through a revised quality assurance framework. Senior leaders have updated existing audit tools, and have delivered comprehensive training on auditing activity, as well as commissioning external experts to test the quality of ongoing audit activity for effectiveness. Learning from audit activity is routinely shared with all staff, and the impact of this learning is translated well into team practice activities and improvement plans. A monthly quality assurance and improvement board, chaired by the DCS, has been established to monitor improvements across the service and ensure that progress is well embedded and leads to sustained improvements for children and young people. A comprehensive, well-targeted audit programme, including multi-agency audits, has been developed.
38. Performance management arrangements have been refined, and the use of performance information to drive service development is now fully embedded. Data management officers have expanded the suite of information available to managers at all levels, and accurate performance reporting is delivered through weekly trackers as well as service scorecards and monthly performance clinics. This ensures that senior leaders have an accurate understanding of key strengths and weaknesses in practice.
39. Senior leaders have demonstrated a clear focus on gathering the views of children and young people and are using this information to inform strategic and operational planning across the service. Children and young people greatly

enjoy the accessibility of senior managers, including the director, who many children know by name. This level of availability to children has been a key strength seen throughout the inspection. The impact of the corporate parenting board has been limited, and the board lacks ambition for children in care and care leavers. Senior leaders have acted to reinvigorate the impact of the corporate parenting board and strengthen the interface between the board and children in care and care leavers.



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