

Cornwall Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 14 October 2019 to 18 October 2019

**Lead inspector: Emmy Tomsett
Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

Children in Cornwall benefit from good and outstanding services. The long-standing and committed senior leadership team has decisively and persistently focused on improving services for children. Services for children in need of help and protection have improved further and are now good. Children in care and care leavers benefit from high-quality support from social workers who are committed to and ambitious about improving their outcomes and life chances.

Political and corporate leaders demonstrate strong commitment to children's services, and have supported whole-council investment. Combined with the leadership team's unwavering focus on continuous improvement, this has resulted in strengthened services. Creative and innovative services have continued to flourish through Gweres tus Yowynk, the dedicated multi-agency edge of care service. A significantly improved focus on participation with children in care ensures that children's voices are heard and acted on. Having psychologists based in teams ensures that social workers and foster carers have access to expertise, which helps planning.

The ambitious, outward-facing senior leadership team promotes a strong culture of learning and development. It has made excellent use of learning from research, best practice and peer reviews. Leaders have an accurate awareness of the quality of practice and services delivered across Cornwall, through accurate and highly effective quality assurance and performance information systems.

What needs to improve

- The provision of suitable accommodation for 16- and 17-year-old homeless young people, including:
 - sufficiency of accommodation
 - assessment and support available to young people
 - management oversight of the use of any unregulated provision.
- The quality and timeliness of life-story work for children.
- The quality of plans for children across the service, particularly timescales for actions.

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

1. Children in Cornwall benefit from good-quality services. A well-established early help service connects families to a wide range of help before they reach crisis. Since the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) in 2018, the early help hub has developed further, with the integration of a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) front door and early years support. Social workers gather information effectively, which ensures that families receive timely advice and support. Early help teams provide well-targeted support across the area. As a result, a low number of families require repeat services from early help.
2. The quality of early help assessments is consistently good. High-quality early help plans include clear worry statements and success goals. When risks to children escalate, there is a timely transfer to social care. Decisions to step families down to early help are largely appropriate and are informed by the views of children and families.
3. The multi-agency referral unit (MARU) is a well-established and highly effective team which covers the services between the hours of 7am and 7pm. This supports effective oversight of the work during transition to the out of hours service. Information-sharing and work with families is timely and of good quality. Thresholds are well understood and applied consistently.

Consent is well considered by social workers. Managers ensure a prompt decision in response to referrals. As a result, children and families receive a swift and proportionate response to their needs.

4. A strong multi-agency presence, including police analysts in the MARU, ensures that domestic abuse notifications and referrals are screened in a timely and effective way. The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) provides an effective forum for supporting decisions about managing risk when there are concerns about domestic abuse. However, action plans are not always consistently recorded in children's case records.
5. Social workers see children from the point of referral and at intervals appropriate to their needs. The stability of the workforce enables children to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with their social worker. The quality of most direct work with children is high and is well reflected in case recording.
6. Strategy discussions and meetings are timely. They are well attended by partner agencies and result in swift actions and outcomes. Child protection enquiries are of a consistently good standard. Social workers and managers make good decisions and provide effective help to children. Multi-agency meetings, including core groups, are well coordinated and attended by relevant professionals.
7. The local authority's preferred social work model is now firmly embedded and has supported the improvements in the quality and impact of social work practice. Assessments are mostly of good quality. They are timely and child-focused, but are not always updated in accordance with children's changing needs. Pre-birth assessments are effective, and include well-coordinated and timely discharge planning meetings. All children in the family are well considered during assessments. Social workers make good use of research to inform assessments and enable parents to understand the patterns of behaviour that need to change.
8. The quality of plans for children is too variable. Social workers can articulate clear and well-targeted plans, but this is not always translated into high-quality written plans for children. Child protection plans are mostly well targeted and specific, while plans for children in need are not consistently timebound or outcome focused. Senior leaders have commissioned considerable training for social workers and managers to improve the overall quality of plans, but the impact of this is not yet consistent. The implementation of the graded care profile tool has ensured that children receive a timely, well-coordinated service in response to concerns regarding neglect.
9. Effective management oversight is reflected through timely and well-recorded rationales for decision-making. Supervision takes place regularly. Social

workers describe receiving good-quality supervision, including reflective discussion. However, the recording of supervision and management action is not always comprehensive or timebound. Senior leaders have acted to address this, although the effects of their actions are not yet consistent. In contrast, oversight by the children's rights advocates (CRAs), who discharge the function of child protection chairs, is consistently strong. This results in well-coordinated and clear child protection plans.

10. When children's circumstances do not improve, timely and appropriate consideration is given to holding legal planning meetings and entering the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline (PLO). PLO arrangements are well embedded, timely and of good quality. Managers ensure strong oversight of children's cases in the PLO process. Children do not experience delay in securing permanence. Family group conferences are well used to ensure that the wider family is involved in planning for children.
11. Disabled children in need of help and protection benefit from an experienced and highly skilled social work team. Social workers are committed to ensuring that children's views and feelings are understood and influence planning. They find creative ways to communicate with children. Assessments are routinely comprehensive, ensuring that all children in the family are engaged.
12. Senior leaders have taken decisive action since the last inspection to significantly improve the assessment and provision of services for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Young people are offered support and mediation to help them return to their families in the first instance. If this is not possible, then young people's needs are assessed, and they are provided with accommodation. Nevertheless, it is not always obvious from case records whether young people have been provided with a clear explanation of their rights to come into care.
13. Demand for supported accommodation is high and outweighs the commissioned accommodation provided by the local authority. On occasions, the local authority has used unregulated provision, where the mix of young people is not always well-matched or assessed. Senior leaders recognise that more needs to be done to increase the provision of suitable accommodation for this group of young people.
14. Children at risk of exploitation benefit from effective multi-agency information-sharing. Action plans developed through the multi-agency criminal and exploitation panel (MACE) are comprehensive and well targeted. Risk assessments are routinely used and result in clear action plans to reduce risk to children. Well-targeted work to identify adults who may present a risk leads to effective disruption activity. When children go missing, the response is effective and timely. Return home interviews result in meaningful actions to reduce risk. Information from these conversations is systematically shared

with MACE and used effectively to inform the safety and trigger plans for young people.

15. Children who are educated at home or who are missing education are identified and supported well by specialist teams. The local authority has acted rigorously to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to monitor arrangements in response to the increasing number of children educated at home. Arrangements to manage allegations against professionals are timely, comprehensive and effective. Casework is well organised, and the designated officer has a systematic overview of the work.

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

16. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have worked enthusiastically to improve the quality of services for children in care and care leavers. Highly committed and determined social workers, personal advisers and managers know their children well and are aspirational for them. There is a strong focus on improving children's experiences and their outcomes. Across the council, political, corporate and operational staff all share a collective commitment to children in their care and to delivering high-quality services for them.
17. Arrangements to support adolescents on the edge of care are innovative and highly effective. Gweres tus Yowynk provides creative packages of intensive support to families on the edge of care in order to change their lives and avoid the need for statutory intervention. Functional family therapists, youth workers and social workers provide comprehensive and imaginative support, resulting in highly valued and well-targeted intervention that helps children to remain in the care of their families.
18. When children cannot remain safely at home with their parents, purposeful action is taken so that they can come into care in a timely manner. Children benefit from living with carers who meet their individual needs, as well as from high-quality living arrangements. Most carers provide a good range of activities, hobbies and opportunities that enable children to enjoy life and improve their experiences. The time children spend with their families is very well supported and closely monitored by social workers and managers. Extensive therapeutic support delivered by in-house psychologists supports parents and promotes reunification where appropriate.
19. Children's rights advocates, who discharge the function of independent reviewing officers, are highly effective in advocating for children, and they systematically ensure that children's experiences improve. Reviews are timely and well chaired. Letters written to children beautifully reflect the child's experience and the rationale for the decisions made. This enables children to understand the decisions that social workers make and supports future life-story work. Nevertheless, not all children have timely life-story work.

20. Ensuring that children achieve permanence is given the highest priority. Permanence planning is considered at the earliest opportunity and takes place at the right pace for the child. Children attend the panel for matching and receive a certificate to celebrate their home becoming permanent.
21. Social workers have a very good understanding of the children they work with; they visit them regularly and ensure that their needs are holistically well considered. Children's emotional well-being is proactively monitored. Psychologists provide significant therapeutic advice and support to social workers as well as foster carers. This helps carers and families develop well-targeted and sustainable strategies to support children.
22. Social workers and managers prioritise children's health needs. Children are routinely taken for dental and optician appointments, and these are discussed at regular child-centred reviews. Creative and highly effective work is undertaken by social workers to support children to attend health assessments.
23. Considerable work has taken place to strengthen the arrangements to identify and respond to children at risk of exploitation. Children receive a swift and well-targeted response to reduce risk. A multi-agency approach enables young people to develop insight into making good choices. Accordingly, outcomes for young people are improving. For example, young people have been made safe and are living successful lives as young adults. This includes them having full-time work, maintaining their own accommodation and, for one young person, successfully parenting their baby.
24. Virtual school leaders are ambitious for pupils and are well regarded by partners. When necessary, school places are quickly identified for children when they come into care. The rate of children's attendance at school is rising. Relationships between the virtual school and designated teachers are strong. The personal education plan (PEP) process is well established and comprehensive. Children are making good educational progress.
25. Highly committed care-experienced apprentices undertake group work with children in care. They deliver training to social workers and foster carers, as well as representing the local authority at national benchmarking events. These apprentices are instrumental in contributing to innovative developments, for example successfully gaining funding to pilot an evaluation of providing free public transport for a group of care leavers.
26. The quality and timeliness of adoption arrangements continues to be high in Cornwall. Adopters receive consistently high-quality support. Adopters describe effective communication and information-sharing, which enables them to remain updated on and fully apprised of the adoption process. Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have successfully implemented

arrangements to strengthen the quality of life-story work and of child permanence reports.

27. Children in care and care leavers benefit from access to an exceptional participation offer. They can participate in a week-long group work programme when they come into care. Children have opportunities to engage in a wide range of participation activities as they wish to, throughout their time in care and beyond. Children's achievements are celebrated and children are actively involved in planning these events. They are also involved in interview panels. The high-profile Care 4 Children Board has well-established links with the corporate parenting board. This ensures that the needs of children in care and care leavers continue to be prioritised.
28. Care leavers benefit from strong relationship-based practice. This includes sensitive work around issues of identity such as sexuality or culture and religion. Social workers and personal advisers are energetic and highly committed to the young people they work with. The majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. When this is not the case, workers are rigorous in ensuring care leavers' immediate safety and focus on moving them as soon as possible. Staying put arrangements are promoted and offer support to independence for an increasing number of care leavers.
29. Visits to care leavers are purposeful according to their level of need, even when living at a distance. Records of these visits describe both the activity and rigorous analysis of care leavers' wishes, feelings and experiences. Social workers and personal advisers are in touch with most young people, and they go above and beyond to support them, regardless of distance.
30. The quality of pathway plans is variable. While there is no discernible detriment to young people, senior leaders have recently effectively implemented arrangements to improve the quality of pathway plans further.
31. Care leavers' health needs are well considered in their plans and in direct work. Their emotional well-being is prioritised. The work of the psychologist in the 16+ team adds exceptional value through engaging young people with complex and traumatic histories. Detailed consultation meetings involve appropriate professionals and result in clear actions to understand young people's behaviours and to ensure that professionals can better engage and support them.
32. The majority of care leavers are well supported to succeed in education and training. There is an extensive range of opportunities to re-engage young people not in education, employment or training. Senior leaders celebrate young people's successes, and this is highly valued. Workers routinely have celebratory meals out with young people when they get their examination results, and young people are proactively encouraged to attend awards events.

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

33. Senior leaders in Cornwall have a strong track record of improving and delivering high-quality services. They have worked purposefully since the last inspection and have continued to strengthen services for children and young people. They are passionate about raising standards and strive for excellence in the services for children and young people. This is highly valued by staff and partners. Corporate commitment to providing apprenticeships for care leavers within the council has been sustained and remains significant. Senior leaders maintain an accurate self-assessment and ensure the focus needed to continually drive improvements.
34. Service developments since the last inspection are evident in a number of areas. An efficient front door (MARU) provides a multi-agency response from 7am to 7pm. The introduction of CAMHs in the early help hub, located within the MARU, ensures that children and families receive high-quality, timely preventative support. Clinical psychologists have been introduced to social work teams, and this contributes to effective assessments and helps children to access the best therapeutic support. Arrangements to respond to allegations against professionals have been consolidated and strengthened. Highly effective managers provide tight oversight of allegations against professionals, which helps to ensure that children are safeguarded.
35. Partnership arrangements have continued to develop. Senior leaders have maintained a clear vision for the future of children's services. The implementation of the One Vision partnership plan has ensured that this is prioritised and confidently delivered. The interface between social care and Our Safeguarding Children Partnership (OSCP) ensures that multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are effectively monitored and delivered. The Cornwall Integrated Children's Services Directorate, implemented in April 2019, has brought renewed focus on health for children.
36. Governance arrangements are effective and well understood. Political leaders have ensured that there is strong corporate commitment across the council to the wider children's safeguarding agenda. Leaders measure the performance of the service against high-performing comparators. They are ambitious and highly active in their pursuit to deliver the best quality of practice. Effective strategic leadership is consistently demonstrated across the service, and has enabled improvements to be sustained. Leaders have created and maintained a culture of learning and development. Substantial use has been made of peer support, engagement in sector-led improvement, external reviews and work with the children's safeguarding partnership.
37. Political leadership is a key strength. This has ensured considerable commitment from across the directorates to the wider children's safeguarding

agenda. Corporate parents place high value on improving outcomes for children and ensure substantial investment for children in care and care leavers.

38. New commissioning arrangements for clinical psychologists, who are embedded in the social work teams, mean that they provide children's consultations to social workers. These contribute to effective assessments and planning pathways for children and help them to access the best therapeutic support. Clinical psychologists provide effective learning about the impact of trauma on children and help practitioners best target support and help children on their road to recovery.
39. The successful introduction of the graded profile has ensured a consistent, effective and well-targeted response to neglect. Arrangements to support adolescents on the edge of care are well delivered through bespoke and creative support provided by Gweres tus Yowynk, the dedicated multi-agency edge of care service. Senior leaders are in the process of implementing a similar service for younger children. Children in care and care leavers have access to effective and well-targeted support and receive an excellent participation offer through Carefree.
40. The new social work model implemented after the last inspection in 2016 is now well embedded. It is contributing to good and outstanding practice across all parts of the service.
41. Responses to children at risk of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, have significantly improved since the 2016 inspection. Strategic arrangements have been strengthened across the partnership. The nature and extent of exploitation is better understood, and partners are well engaged in the preventative agenda. Awareness-raising activities in the wider community have led to an increase in referrals in this area. Senior leaders recognise that more systematic work is needed, and it is planned with licensing departments and accommodation providers.
42. Senior leaders have taken authoritative action to improve the service for homeless young people, including a commissioned six-bed unit to provide appropriate accommodation. Nevertheless, a recent increase in demand has seen the use of accommodation that is not of the required standard. As a result, arrangements to provide support and accommodation to homeless young people are too variable. Senior leaders recognise this and are taking action to further strengthen the service.
43. Regular staff health checks gauge the experiences and views of social workers and other practitioners in social care. Staff feel well supported. Caseloads have significantly reduced and are described by staff as being manageable. Supervision takes place regularly, including group supervision. The recording of formal supervision is not always sufficiently detailed and

does not reflect the quality of reflective discussion. Action plans are not routinely comprehensive or timebound. While senior leaders have acted to address this, the impact is not yet consistent.

44. Workforce stability is strong. The local authority's workforce development strategy clearly sets out the revised approach to recruitment and retention. Senior leaders have had an uncompromising focus on workforce development, which has been sustained over recent years. Staff development is delivered through an effective and well-targeted workforce development framework. Staff morale is high. Senior leaders have ensured that learning and staff development are key priorities in Cornwall. Leaders are responsive to contemporary training needs and ensure that staff are well equipped and trained. Multi-agency training, provided through OSCP, is considerable.
45. Highly effective quality assurance arrangements are extensive and sophisticated. This ensures that senior leaders have an accurate oversight of performance across all areas of children's services. The quality assurance and performance management system is highly effective. Audit activity is widespread, and learning from audit activity is purposeful and highly valued by staff and senior leaders. The impact of learning from audit activity is well translated into individual and team practice activities.
46. Performance management arrangements are wide-ranging and highly effective. They are used confidently to drive service development. Performance officers have further refined the suite of information available to managers at all levels. Accurate performance reporting is delivered through six-weekly trackers, as well as service scorecards and monthly performance meetings. This ensures that senior leaders have an accurate understanding of key strengths and weaknesses in the service.
47. Aspirational senior leaders have demonstrated a sustained and clear focus on gathering the views of children and young people, as well as professionals. They use this to inform strategic and operational planning across the service. Feedback to staff is purposeful and well embedded. The work of the CRAs further supports this strand of work to ensure that leaders are aware of the experiences of children and professionals, and this leads to improved quality of practice.

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