

Sheffield City Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 15 July 2019 to 26 July 2019

**Lead inspector: Alison Smale
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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children’s services in Sheffield are good. Senior leaders and managers have achieved steady progress in improving the vast majority of services since the last inspection, in May 2013, when services were judged overall to require improvement to be good. This led to a comprehensive improvement plan, overseen by an improvement board, which is supported by significant additional corporate investment. Senior managers have successfully used their self-evaluation, peer review process and feedback from Ofsted’s earlier focused visits to improve services for vulnerable children. This has resulted in most children receiving good services which meet their needs.

Children are at the centre of practice and they benefit from child-focused staff and services. The views of children are valued by senior leaders and are listened to at all levels within the organisation. Children’s views influence their individual plans and inform improvements in policy and practice. A skilled and confident workforce, together with a wide range of services, effectively meets the needs of most children and their families and improves their circumstances. In most parts of the

service, social workers experience an environment that supports good social work practice. However, there are some discrete areas of the service where practice still requires improvement, such as arrangements when children go missing from home and care, the early identification of children who are at lower risks from exploitation, the management of allegations against professionals and the consistent application of the threshold to step up from early help to children's social care. Senior managers were aware of these weaknesses prior to the inspection. Effective action plans are in place to address a small number of performance issues to mitigate the risks where social work practice and some frontline management is weaker.

The needs of children in care are very well met, and those leaving care receive an impressive service that meets their needs to a high standard. Despite the efforts of the local authority, there remain challenges because there are not enough local placements for children with complex and challenging needs.

What needs to improve

- the consistent application of the threshold to step up to children's social care from early help
- the use of screening tools to update and inform plans for children who are at a lower risk of exploitation
- arrangements for children who go missing from home and care
- arrangements to manage allegations against professionals
- placement sufficiency for the most complex and vulnerable children and adolescents.

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

1. Children and families in Sheffield benefit from effective and accessible early help. Strong partnership working and the support of a range of specialist services help to improve children's lives. Most families receive a timely and proportionate response to prevent small difficulties escalating. When needs do escalate, the threshold to step up from early help to children's social care is not always applied consistently. A small minority of families wait too long to receive the right service at the right time, but they are supported to access preventative services in the interim, which mitigates the impact on children.
2. In the Sheffield Safeguarding Hub (SSH), responses to contacts and referrals are timely and effective. Accurate decisions on applying the threshold for access to children's social care are made to inform the next steps. Social workers are skilled at communicating with professionals and families to gather more information and explore potential solutions. In the SSH, management

oversight of frontline practice is evident in all cases at key decision-making stages. Management direction is clear and helpful in progressing actions. Strategy meetings are held in the SSH when children may be at risk of significant harm. Strategy meetings are well attended, and appropriate information is shared and discussed with key professionals to inform risk assessment and necessary actions to safeguard children.

3. The emergency duty team service is embedded within the SSH to ensure a seamless response to new and existing safeguarding concerns. Out-of-hours support to children and families is further enhanced through the Aspire project, which remains open until 10pm each evening. This provides crisis intervention to prevent children needing to enter care in an emergency by keeping families together where appropriate.
4. Children identified as being at high risk from exposure to domestic violence are discussed at daily multi-agency domestic abuse meetings with partner agencies. Information-sharing and interim safety plans, pending the outcome of assessments when police have assessed victims as high risk, are helping to better safeguard children where domestic abuse is a feature in their lives.
5. When children are identified as potentially needing help and protection, assessments are allocated swiftly, and children are seen quickly by a social worker. The vast majority of assessments are timely, thoroughly analysed and well written. Where there is poorer-quality practice, senior managers are aware of this and have acted swiftly to mitigate weaker management oversight. Social workers are skilled at engaging with children and families, including absent parents, to ascertain their wishes and feelings and achieve progress on presenting issues through the course of the assessment.
6. Child in need meetings and child protection core groups are convened to determine the required timescale for assessment. These meetings are well attended by key professionals and families. This results in good information-sharing and decisions. During assessments, social workers provide help and advice to families and ensure that children receive the right services and support.
7. The vast majority of child protection and child in need plans are thorough, effective and are reviewed regularly through multi-agency meetings. Progress and impact are measured through the effective use of the local authority's social work model at every stage of the child's journey. Where plans have not been successful in bringing about positive change within the child's timescales, they are escalated to the next level of intervention. This helps to protect children from harm.
8. Children on a child protection plan are seen regularly and alone by social workers. Effective tailored direct work is undertaken in an age-appropriate way for most children to help them understand their experiences and inform their

plans. Advocates represent children's views at child protection conferences to a high standard, enabling children's views to be powerfully conveyed and impactful both to professionals and family members.

9. The pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline is used effectively to help and protect children whose circumstances do not improve when they are subject to child protection plans. Letters before proceedings sent to parents are clear about what needs to improve and what is expected of them. These are promptly completed following the decision being made by the legal gateway panel that the public law outline process is to be initiated.
10. Where children are identified as being at high risk of exploitation, effective specialist teams provide dedicated support. Targeted support staff and partner agency colleagues work hard and effectively to develop strong relationships with these young people and address all of their needs to reduce risk. Risks are mostly well understood, and protective action is taken and support is provided. However, for a small number of children with lower risks of exploitation open to fieldwork and care teams, risk assessments are not routinely updated to establish the level of risk to inform their plans. Senior managers are aware that there is more to be done to develop a fully contextualised approach to safeguarding and are developing this as a priority area for improvement.
11. Arrangements for children who go missing from home and care are not strong enough. Most children are not contacted or seen soon enough following the missing episode, despite an independent commissioned service having responsibility for this important task. Analysis and actions resulting from contact with the children who go missing are partial and incomplete. Senior managers are aware of this and are taking action to review commissioning arrangements and improve this area of practice.
12. Private fostering arrangements and practice are a strength. Children identified as being in private fostering arrangements are thoroughly assessed and supported to ensure that their needs are understood and addressed. An initial joint visit by the child's social worker and the private fostering social worker ensures that both the child and carers are assessed in a timely way. Statutory visits are within timescales, and direct work is undertaken with children to ensure that they are settled and happy in their placements. The Connected Persons team coordinates publicity and targeted communication across the community to raise awareness of private fostering, supplemented by a specific 'Private Fostering Week'.
13. Disabled children in need of help and protection benefit from committed social workers who know them well and ensure that their views and feelings are understood. Children are seen regularly in line with their needs. Plans and assessments are updated regularly through child in need meetings which address wider needs and risks to safeguard children. Plans are clear and engage appropriate services in responding to identified need. However,

contingency plans need to be more explicit on children's plans. Where possible, some families are enabled to access direct payments and manage their own package of support. The needs of other children in the family are well understood, assessed and responded to. Supervision records demonstrate that managers have a good grasp of key issues, with clearly recorded actions that support workers to prioritise their work effectively.

14. Arrangements to manage allegations made against professionals are not always timely or effective, due to a lack of management cover when the designated officer is absent. During this inspection, senior managers immediately put in place additional management scrutiny and are undertaking a thematic audit of arrangements to ensure cover is available during staff absence. The designated officer is very aware of the diverse needs and changing issues within the city and is proactive in raising awareness of the role. The designated officer has already effectively engaged some hard-to-reach groups and has been instrumental in developing their trust in children's social care.
15. Culturally sensitive and professionally curious practice is evident. Social workers explore risks around modern slavery, female genital mutilation and forced marriage, and carry out tenacious work, involving all family members, including fathers and male carers, to understand the risks. Effective action is taken to ensure that children at risk are protected.
16. When young people aged 16 to 17 years old present as homeless, prompt and thorough assessments take place in respect of their needs, which result in young people either coming into care or being found accommodation and given effective support as children in need.

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

17. Children are supported effectively to remain with their families, when it is safe for them to do so. A broad range of edge-of-care services support children and families to make positive changes to their lives. This provides them with positive opportunities to remain together safely. As a result, children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate to do so. In the vast majority of cases, this is planned following a thorough assessment that identifies the child's vulnerabilities and support needs. The evidence provided at the commencement of care proceedings to progress children's plans towards permanence is strong. Both the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the local judiciary speak positively about the quality of evidence provided by the local authority.
18. Children achieve timely permanence through a range of effective and well-planned options, including support to live with family or friends. Family group meetings help to identify family and friend options early. Many children benefit

from care from people they already know and trust. Alternative permanence options are carefully considered when placement with family or friends is not possible. Parallel planning occurs from an early stage, meaning that permanence through adoption is achieved quickly. Fostering for adoption placements are increasingly used. This minimises unnecessary moves for babies and affords security sooner. Where possible, brothers and sisters live together, with decisions informed by comprehensive together or apart assessments. Some children achieve permanence through long-term fostering, special guardianship orders and child arrangement orders. Senior leaders have taken decisive action, with success, to reduce the amount of time it takes to secure permanence in these ways.

19. Plans for children to return home from care are regularly considered and supported by good assessments, safety planning and comprehensive support packages. As a result, children have benefited from successful transitions home, and have had positive experiences. Placement with Parents regulations are used appropriately for an interim period until it is established that statutory intervention is no longer required.
20. Children in care benefit from social workers who know their children well, see them regularly and alone, and strive to build good relationships with them. Interpreters are used when English is not the child's first language to ensure that they understand and fully engage in conversations and decisions about their lives. Social workers undertake direct work effectively to ensure that even young children understand why decisions have been reached and what plans are for their longer-term care. However, not all children in permanent placements (other than adoption) have life-story books. Senior managers have taken positive action through a commissioned project to increase the use of life-story books, and, as a result, they are now considered for most children.
21. Assessments of children's needs are regularly updated, and children's views consistently inform their plans. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) know children well and regularly see them outside of their reviews to help children participate and express their views. They provide valued insight into children's lives and challenge professionals effectively on behalf of children to ensure that they receive the right support and that their plans are progressed. Children also benefit from good advocacy support from a commissioned service.
22. Family time for children is carefully and sensitively considered, based on children's views and robust risk analysis. Children benefit from spending quality time with people who are important to them, which enhances their sense of identity. Children have access to a range of leisure opportunities and are encouraged to pursue cultural or religious practices according to their needs. This is helping to build their confidence, self-esteem and sense of identity.
23. The virtual school has effective relationships with schools and sets high expectations for children in care. Targets and interventions are appropriate and

monitored regularly through personal education plans (PEPs) to ensure that actions demonstrate positive impact and support children to make progress. However, PEPs vary in quality. Senior leaders and managers are working to improve this. Senior leaders and managers ensure that pupil premium funding is spent appropriately. However, its impact on progress is not evaluated consistently. Key stage 4 attainment is below national averages, but progress is in line with national averages and improving. Thorough monitoring and tracking of attendance and exclusions ensure that most children in care attend school regularly. As a result, exclusions have reduced, and attendance is in line with national averages. However, children in care in the current key stage 4 cohort remain more likely to be absent than their peers. Action is being taken to respond to this issue and numbers are beginning to reduce.

24. Children's physical and emotional health needs are well met. Children benefit from a strong specialist support network where this is necessary. Having a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) worker in the children in care service and a psychologist in the fostering team means that advice and support for emotional needs are quickly available to support social workers and carers respond to children's needs.
25. The vast majority of children live in stable local placements which meet their needs. However, when children enter care, there are insufficient placements for a small number of children with the most complex and challenging needs. This means that some children experience delay in being matched to a permanent home, with some experiencing temporary moves which are unsettling. Senior managers have acted successfully to begin to increase the numbers of foster carers being recruited. They have developed the Aspire project, which supports the most vulnerable children and young people to achieve stability in their lives. Early indications are that this very new service is having a positive impact on achieving stability for some children, but it is too soon to see the full impact.
26. Foster carers are well supported and committed to the children in their care. However, gaps in management oversight of training mean that it is not possible to see who has completed the required training within expected timescales. In addition, supervising social workers and foster carers have not yet received training on emerging themes in the sector, for example county lines.
27. Systems, processes and procedures for recruiting and supporting adopters are effective. The service has a strong programme of targeted recruitment to increase placement options for those children who wait longer for a new home. Adoption assessments are thorough, with good analysis. Adoption panels execute their functions well and provide good scrutiny of applicants' motives to adopt. Strong quality assurance systems improve the quality of reports, ensuring that a clear focus on improvement is maintained. Adoption support plans are clear, and adopters say that they receive good-quality social work

support. There is a range of support services for children and adopters, who are at various stages of their adoption journey. Adopters speak positively about the support they receive. The service is using the Adoption Support Fund effectively to buy packages of therapeutic support and training and put them to good effect.

28. Care leavers receive an impressive level of support. They benefit from strong relationships with their personal advisers, who go the extra mile for their young people, ensuring they have access to all necessary support and help to maximise their opportunities and experiences. For example, personal advisers make sure that care leavers are smartly dressed for interviews. They know their young people very well and talk about them with respect and pride. Contact between young people and their personal advisers is tailored to meet their needs. The views of young people are integrated into their pathway plans and much of the plan is articulated by the young person, meaning that their experience, wishes and feelings are very clear and influence the outcomes. The local authority has employed a 'looked after' nurse, who has put systems in place to address the shortfall in young people understanding their health histories. A speech and language therapist has been deployed by the service to help care leavers find their voice and increase their confidence in communicating during interviews, in part leading to an increase in care leavers securing employment opportunities.
29. Corporate parenting is highly effective and emulates what a good parent should be. There are many initiatives which enhance young people's lives, for example participation in a bike workshop, the Door 43 drop-in service, the Apollo project, and council apprenticeships. These innovative services, and more, ensure that care leavers' needs are being met to a high standard. Where young people aspire to enter higher education, they are supported practically and financially. Care leavers who have engaged in the Apollo project have developed in confidence. A good number have benefited from work experience, and some have moved into traineeships, apprenticeships and full-time employment.
30. Care leavers live in appropriate accommodation and are well supported. The recently established post of staying put and supported lodgings coordinator is helping to ensure that staying put is considered in planning for all children in foster placements as they approach adulthood. Senior managers have been creative in developing staying close accommodation, which is enabling some care leavers to continue to live alongside and receive outreach support from their previous children's home carers. It is extremely positive for young people in residential care that this is being developed so that more care leavers benefit. This exemplifies excellence in corporate parenting.
31. Children in care and care leavers are helped to understand their rights and entitlements. The children in care council and care leavers union meet regularly. They are a group of very articulate and passionate children and

young people who are being listened to by senior managers and leaders and who are succeeding in supporting and improving the experiences of other children and young people in care. There are many examples of the influence this group has had. These examples include improving social work practice and developing a placement game to encourage children to have conversations about placement experiences, which has been shared with several other local authorities.

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

32. Senior leaders have made a substantial commitment to ensuring that children receive the right help at the right time. Social workers and managers increasingly benefit from environments in which they are enabled to develop and enhance their skills to a high standard. The strong commitment and willingness to invest in the workforce are evident and impactful. The maintenance and development of creative services, together with strong performance management and staff care, mean that social workers increasingly benefit from improved management oversight and support. This enables them to reflect on their practice and make the right decisions for vulnerable children.
33. The chief executive and lead member are well informed and successfully hold the director of children's services (DCS) and their leadership team to account for the quality of practice and the challenges in the local area. The lead member is very experienced in and knowledgeable about children's social care, with high aspirations for children. The lead member provides effective challenge to senior managers on issues that affect children in Sheffield. Relationships with partner agencies are highly effective. There is shared ownership and a commitment to improving the lives of children and their families in Sheffield.
34. Senior managers have successfully used their self-evaluation, peer review process and feedback from earlier Ofsted focused visits to deliver programmes of change which are improving social work practice and services for vulnerable children. These include improvements to the SSH that effectively embed the social work model in many services, and improvements in identifying fathers who are absent or living separately from their families, who are now engaged wherever possible and their views considered.
35. While there has been significant improvement across much of the service, there are still a small number of elements of the service where practice is not yet good. Senior managers were aware of all areas identified prior to the inspection which needed improvement, except for the specific issue with the arrangements to manage allegations against professionals. Systems to monitor timeliness and track cases were already in place, but there was no contingency

planning to cover when the designated officer was absent. In response, senior managers took immediate action to understand and address this issue.

36. Senior managers were aware that the response to children who go missing from home and care needs to be strengthened. They recognise that progress to address underperformance in the commissioned service has been too slow. They also recognise that, while specialist teams for child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation are in place and address higher risks effectively, screening where children are at a lower risk of child exploitation is not sufficiently strong. Effective action plans are in place, which are addressing a small number of performance issues in some field work teams and within early help to mitigate against the risks where some social work practice and frontline management are weaker.
37. Senior leaders are very child-focused and have looked at practice and service successes in other local authority areas. As a result, they have developed creative solutions based on this learning, which children in Sheffield are now benefiting from. Vulnerable groups have been effectively identified and a broad range of specialist support services have been put in place. These include 'fresh start' for parents who have had children removed from their care, deploying mental health workers into children in care teams and deploying a speech and language therapist into the Apollo project.
38. The local authority's sense of corporate responsibility for children in care and care leavers is unambiguous. Senior leaders provide proactive and committed corporate parenting. The care leaver service has improved significantly. Aspirations for young people are high, and young people benefit from tailored and inventive support. Senior leaders and managers actively listen to children. Services are established to ensure that children influence and participate in decisions which affect their lives. Children in care and care leavers' views are highly regarded. Children in care groups value the regular meetings they have with senior managers, which provide effective opportunities for them to influence policy and practice. Many creative opportunities have been implemented to support children in care and care leavers to develop and lead fulfilling lives.
39. Children value the advocacy service for children who are experiencing initial child protection conferences, which has recently expanded to include the first core group and review. Social work practice is informed by the wishes and views of children. Direct work is routinely undertaken by social workers and influences both professionals and families in their understanding of the impact of children's experiences. Pathway plans bring young people's experiences and views to life. A survey of children, the children in care council and the care leavers union has been influential in achieving changes to practice.
40. Well-embedded processes are in place to understand performance information from operational to strategic levels within the service. Improvement

dashboards illustrate key performance indicators in a user friendly and understandable way. The DCS holds a fortnightly performance clinic and an improvement board bi-monthly, which is attended by the lead member, senior leaders and key agency partners. Managers receive contemporaneous compliance reports via a dashboard. This enables a good understanding of performance across all management levels and the ability to challenge and improve practice and services in most areas.

41. Senior leaders utilise performance management and monitoring effectively to understand services and drive improvement. Senior leaders have identified and addressed some key weaknesses within the service. Management oversight and support have been strengthened by increasing the capacity of service managers and creating consultant social workers posts to provide expert advice and opportunities for social workers to reflect on their practice. However, senior leaders know that this is not fully embedded across all teams and that, despite the actions taken, there is still inconsistency in the quality of practice in some discrete areas, because of weaker managers.
42. Effective systems are in place which minimise drift and delay in progressing children's plans. There is strong senior management oversight of and accountability for higher risk cases through the high-risk matrix and key panels chaired by skilled senior managers. The audit process has recently been strengthened and improved, although the impact of this has not yet been fully established. Audits identify compliance and process issues and, in most cases, the quality of practice and impact on children. However, senior managers recognise that more needs to be done to ensure that audits are consistently of good quality and to monitor more effectively the impact of improvement actions for children.
43. The workforce strategy is comprehensive and well thought through. The local authority has worked tenaciously to ensure an increasingly stable, capable and skilled social care workforce. As a result, staff like working for Sheffield City Council. Social workers and other staff working with children benefit from a comprehensive training and development offer, which enables them to develop their practice and skills to a high level. Staff benefit from regular supervision, although the local authority knows that quality of this varies. Clear expectations have been set for maximum workloads. Caseloads are monitored regularly, and most social workers benefit from manageable caseloads. Senior leaders and managers have created an environment in which good social work is nurtured and celebrated. There are several teams where the quality and impact of social work are impressive, although this is not yet consistent across the service.



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