

Inspection of Sheffield local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 22 September 2023

Lead inspector: Rachel Griffiths, His Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
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| 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 | Outstanding |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers | Good |
| Overall effectiveness | Good |

Many services for children and families in Sheffield have improved since the previous inspection in 2019, when the local authority was judged to be good overall, but requires improvement in help and protection. Children now receive good help and protection, and children in care receive an outstanding service. This improvement has been supported by a child-focused, stable, consistent and skilled workforce, who share senior leaders' commitment to supporting children to remain living within their family network if possible, and a well-embedded practice model. These aspects, as well as investment in and implementation of high-quality early help, are making a tangible and positive difference to the lives of children and families in Sheffield.

Variability remains in respect of the quality and impact of return home interviews for children who go missing, and in relation to the use of chronologies to inform assessments and planning. While services for care leavers remain good overall, the wide range of services previously available to them prior to the pandemic has reduced. After a period of senior leadership churn, the now stable and permanent leadership team is taking action to address this.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency of the use of chronologies to inform assessments and planning.
- The quality and impact of return home interviews for children who go missing.
- Timely access and support for care leavers in relation to their mental health.
- The quality and consistency of the recording of case supervision to promote reflection and learning for workers.

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

1. Children in Sheffield receive consistently effective and responsive help and protection.
2. Children and families in Sheffield who need early help receive skilled and impactful support from an extensive and accessible range of services across the spectrum of children's ages and diverse needs. Early help teams provide targeted support, often designed with families, that addresses children's needs and builds on their families' strengths.
3. When children's needs change, processes for stepping up to and down from statutory social care are understood and carefully applied. Consequently, children receive the right support at the right time. The breadth and depth of early help provided to children and their families help to reduce the numbers of children requiring intervention by statutory services.
4. Skilled and experienced social workers in the safeguarding hub screen contacts and referrals thoroughly and quickly. Thresholds are well understood. Parental consent is carefully considered and overridden when children's safety requires this. Children receive sound and well-informed initial assessments, resulting in well-evidenced decisions and the right type of help being promptly provided.
5. The police do not pre-triage their contacts before sending them into the safeguarding hub. This gap has required children's services to provide significant additional resources to screen the high volume of police referrals and this places pressure on a busy service.
6. Daily multi-agency domestic abuse meetings held in the safeguarding hub carefully consider the level of risk, the impact of abuse on the victim, and the lived experiences of the children. Interim safety-planning is prompt and effective.
7. Experienced workers and managers in the out-of-hours team provide effective emergency help and protection to children.

8. Initial responses in the safeguarding hub to children who go missing from home are timely. Return home interviews usually take place promptly for children in need and children in care. The quality of information gathered and recorded in interviews is mixed. The interviews do not consistently consider push-and-pull factors. This means that decisive action at an earlier stage is not always taken to prevent risk from escalating.
9. Children who frequently go missing, and are at risk of exploitation in the community, receive determined and impactful support from specialist multi-agency workers in the Amber service. Inspectors saw examples of children who have been exploited by criminal gangs being helped to successfully exit the gangs through persistent social work and police disruption activities. The language used by some workers to describe children who are sexually exploited is occasionally inappropriate. Leaders have plans to provide further training in this area.
10. Social workers act quickly when they become aware of allegations of significant harm against a child. Well-attended strategy meetings and effective information-sharing result in rigorous safety-planning. Social workers see children promptly. Timely child-protection enquiries provide a thorough analysis of children's needs and the risks that they face. Decisions to hold an initial child-protection conference are carefully considered and appropriately applied in line with assessed risk. When appropriate, children benefit from the support of an independent advocate at their child-protection conferences.
11. Social workers' visits to children are prompt and consistent with the level of presenting issues. Strong engagement with children, families and partner agencies leads to a good understanding of children's needs and unique characteristics.
12. Most assessments of children's needs, including disabled children, are thorough and include sensitive analytical explorations of children's individual needs. Assessments are not consistently informed by a detailed chronology of children's experiences to better inform the impact of significant and cumulative incidents or events. Pre-birth assessments are comprehensive and thorough.
13. Most child-protection and child-in-need plans, including those for disabled children, are detailed and clear about the changes required to improve children's safety and experiences, and they are dynamically reviewed. Plans have clear actions and timescales that help parents to understand what they need to do to improve their children's lives. Regular child-protection core-group meetings and child-in-need reviews measure progress and reassess risk. This results in appropriate and timely amendments to plans that improve children's lives.
14. Stability in the workforce means that most children and their families develop trusting relationships with a consistent social worker, who they know they can rely on. This helps parents to understand professionals' concerns and what

needs to change. Frequent and sensitive direct work carried out with children and families helps to address concerns and improves many children's circumstances.

15. Direct work with disabled children is thoughtfully tailored to their unique communication profiles. Disabled children with significant mental health difficulties receive skilled help from experienced advanced social workers in a dedicated specialist mental health team.
16. When children's circumstances are not improving quickly enough, or if risks remain or increase, children are appropriately escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). While leaders know that there is work to do to improve the tracking of children in PLO, practice in this area has remained effective since the previous inspection. Many children are successfully diverted away from court proceedings. As a result of this impactful work undertaken with families during pre-proceedings, children's safety and experiences have improved.
17. Children who have experienced harm, and those at risk of harm from adults and volunteers working with children, are safeguarded by a competent and responsive local authority designated officer service, which has improved since the previous inspection.
18. Children who live in private fostering arrangements are safeguarded by knowledgeable and skilled social workers, who support them, visit them regularly and know them well.
19. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive a responsive service. Children's housing needs are promptly addressed, resulting in children being provided accommodation in line with their needs. While children's records demonstrate that children's right to become looked after is considered, where it is refused, the records do not offer assurance that their right to become looked after has been fully explained.
20. Leaders are keenly focused on ensuring that children are in school and receiving suitable education. Where families opt for elective home education (EHE) for their child, EHE officers or family intervention workers meet with parents to explain what this entails. Any children missing education for other reasons are located and supported to return to school quickly.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

21. Children in care receive an outstanding service that results in their life experiences significantly improving.
22. Children only come into care when it is necessary and appropriate for them to do so. Specialist edge-of-care workers provide a high level of help and support to children who are at risk of coming into care. As a result, many children have been able to remain safely living at home. Likewise, some children who have

entered care have been very well supported to safely reunite with their parents in line with their best interests.

23. When admissions to care are necessary, most are planned, with thorough management oversight, via a panel. This ensures that all avenues have been explored and the most appropriate placement is identified.
24. When it is not possible for children to remain living with their birth parents, social workers secure alternative permanence plans for them as quickly as possible. Social workers explore a full range of permanence options for children and plan concurrently until permanence is achieved. Rigorous consideration is given to whether children can remain within their family and friends network. A high number of children who have exited care in the last six months have done so via special guardianship orders granted to kinship carers. This has been a positive outcome for many children. It is enhancing children's sense of identity and belonging.
25. When it is not possible for children to live within their family and friends network, achieving permanence via adoption is considered early, parallel to other plans. Sheffield is part of a regional adoption agency (One Adoption South Yorkshire). When adoption is the right plan for a child, the child and their adopters are extremely well supported through their adoption journey. As a result of well-matched placements and careful transitions, children successfully settle with their new parent(s).
26. Many children in Sheffield achieve permanence through long-term fostering. The confirmation of permanence via a panel helps to give children the sense of belonging that they need. Matching processes are thorough and fully informed by children's views.
27. Arrangements for children in care placed under Placement with Parent regulations are regularly reviewed to ensure that the placement remains the right one for the child. Timely actions to discharge care orders when they are no longer required mean that children and families can continue their lives without unnecessary statutory intervention.
28. Most children in care enjoy trusting, enduring relationships with social workers who know them well. Social workers visit children in line with their individual needs and they speak about them with pride. Sensitive and beautifully presented life-story work is helping children to understand their life histories. The timing of this work is thoughtfully planned around life events and any therapeutic needs children may have.
29. In consultation with children, social workers update assessments of children's needs before their looked after reviews. These assessments are of high quality, and they inform day-to-day and longer-term planning. Minutes of reviews, written to children, help children to understand who is doing what to help and support them. Independent reviewing officers know children well. They provide

appropriate and effective challenge and advocacy for children. This ensures that plans are progressing and children's needs are being met.

30. Social workers have an excellent oversight of children's physical and emotional health needs. The support of an in-house psychologist based in the fostering service helps support children and their carers through challenging times. Children have access to a specialist child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). On occasion, where need is very specialised, and there is a delay, private resources are drawn on to ensure that children receive this help quickly and within the child's timescale.
31. Most children are doing well at school. The virtual head has clear oversight of children's educational progress. Most children's personal education plans are comprehensive and capture the actions needed to help children reach their full potential. The outcomes for children in care at the end of key stage 4 have recently improved.
32. Children spend quality time with those who are important to them. Social workers maintain close oversight of family-time arrangements to ensure that these arrangements are best meeting children's needs.
33. Social workers meet their statutory responsibilities to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are in care. These children live in homes and accommodation that meet their needs, in supportive communities, and they are assisted to secure their immigration status.
34. Social workers undertake proactive work with children who are at risk of exploitation. Multi-agency responses to risks in this area are helping to keep children safer.
35. Most children in care live in high-quality, stable foster placements that are located within, or close to, Sheffield. Children are supported to participate in a range of enjoyable activities to help develop their interests, skills, confidence and self-esteem. Foster carers feel well supported. This helps promote stability and consistency for children.
36. Most children living in residential homes, either in or outside Sheffield, are settled and making progress. These children are visited in line with their needs, they have access to education and health specialists, and they take part in a range of activities of their choosing. Improvement to the quality of Sheffield City Council's children's homes is now being prioritised, following a period where the quality of care had deteriorated.
37. Due to sufficiency challenges, Sheffield has a very small number of children aged under 16 with complex needs living in unregistered children's homes. There is regular and effective multi-agency oversight of these unsuitable arrangements, while the local authority actively seeks more suitable registered arrangements or supports providers to become registered with Ofsted.

38. Participation and engagement with children in Sheffield is a real strength. Children have a solid influence in shaping the local authority's provision of services. Children report feeling listened to and valued by social workers, managers and leaders. Participation activities, such as a recent care leavers' barbecue and other celebratory events and activities for children in care and care leavers, reflect the senior leaders' ambition to get things right for children in Sheffield.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

39. Most care leavers are receiving a good service. The early allocation and involvement of personal advisers to children at the age of 16 enables children to build positive and trusting relationships with their personal adviser before their transition to adulthood.
40. Personal advisers know their care leavers very well. They provide practical and emotional support, which helps care leavers in times of challenge. Personal advisers maintain regular contact with care leavers in line with their needs and wishes. They visit care leavers regularly, and often more frequently than their targeted timescales, including daily, if required. This also includes care leavers up to the age of 25. Regular, warm and friendly text communication from personal advisers to care leavers supports the continuation of positive relationships and encourages care leavers to keep in touch with their personal advisers.
41. Pathway plans, sensitively written with care leavers, explicitly detail the support that will be provided to help care leavers meet their goals and aspirations. Care leavers' unique characteristics inform their plans. In a minority of cases, pathway planning is hindered by plans not being updated when circumstances have changed.
42. Vulnerable care leavers who are at risk of exploitation are well supported by their personal advisers. Comprehensive risk assessments and safety plans help to keep care leavers safer.
43. Personal advisers build strong relationships with care leavers who are parents. Joint working between personal advisers, social workers, early help workers and care leavers is helping to ensure that care leavers' needs are met, at the same time as supporting them to develop skills to become successful parents.
44. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly by their personal advisers. Close links with probation help to ensure that appropriate support is in place when care leavers leave custody.
45. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers experience proactive support to help them achieve their goals and succeed in education and training. Their identity needs are well considered and supported.

46. Personal advisers support care leavers who are LGBTQ+ to explore their identity and find peers in local support groups.
47. A good number of care leavers benefit from continuing to live with their foster carers via 'staying put' arrangements. Some care leavers who attend university appropriately return to their foster family at any time, such as holidays and weekends.
48. Personal advisers support care leavers to develop emotional resilience and independence skills prior to taking on their own tenancies. The use of a 'staying close' flat and a 'tenancy ready' programme helps care leavers to develop the skills they need to successfully live independently. Most care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs.
49. Overall, care leavers are made aware of their rights and entitlements. The care leaver offer is explained in informative leaflets and on a website. The offer is not sufficiently clear in respect of council tax exemptions and the Wi-Fi offer.
50. Care leavers are provided with their health histories when they turn 18 years of age. This means that they have important information about their lives and where to access health advice in the future should they need this.
51. Care leavers open to CAMHS prior to their 18th birthday receive a smooth transition to adult mental health services. However, for those care leavers who are not receiving mental health support prior to turning 18, there are limited mental health services available to them. For a small number of care leavers, this has impacted on their emotional well-being. Youth Voice and Influence Service workers and some personal advisers have shared their concerns about the lack of specialist mental health services for care leavers. As a starting point in addressing this, leaders have appointed a mental health nurse one day a week to increase the support available to personal advisers supporting care leavers with emotional difficulties. Leaders know that more needs to be done to meet the higher-level mental health needs of care leavers.
52. Despite the best efforts of personal advisers to support care leavers in Sheffield to engage and succeed in employment, education and training, the results of these efforts remain mixed. In response to this, a three-year initiative funded by the Department for Education is underway, with a dedicated resilience and transitions coordinator, and a wraparound menu of support to help increase employment, education and training opportunities. It is too early to see the full impact of this initiative.
53. An impressive group of care-experienced young adults who work in the Youth Voice and Influence Service has been instrumental in making changes and improvements to children's services. This group has a strong voice and its experiences, opinions and feedback directly influence service delivery.

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

54. The recently formed permanent leadership team, together with corporate and political leaders, has high aspirations to build on the already solid foundations of social work practice in Sheffield, to ensure that every child and young person from Sheffield has a strong sense of belonging and excellent experiences.
55. Senior leaders model a clear child-focus. This shines through children's services at all levels of the workforce. Like leaders, staff have an impressive commitment to getting things right for Sheffield children. This is exemplified by an ethos and the concerted work by all staff to support children to remain living with their birth family if it is safe to do so, and the prioritisation of family and friends networks to help ensure that, wherever possible, children can remain within networks familiar to them.
56. A highly effective workforce strategy has resulted in there being a committed and stable workforce in Sheffield. As a result, most children benefit from having consistent workers who they, and their family members, learn to trust. This is having a positive impact for families and it has ensured the sustainability and improvement in service delivery.
57. The operation of the early help and edge-of-care services provides good examples of children's social care, the police and health partners working well together and keeping children at the heart of practice. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and designated family judge are also complimentary about the improving quality of practice in Sheffield and the constructive relationships held that contribute to improvements in practice. While strategic partnerships are mostly effective, the local authority is aware that more needs to be done to support better engagement by the police service in triaging contacts that go into the safeguarding hub, and to provide a better response to care leavers to support good mental health.
58. Child-focused planning and the delivery of services that aim to build on family strengths underpin the model of practice in Sheffield. The model of practice is well understood and used by staff and partners. This is helping to ensure consistent and effective responses to children that make a positive difference to most children's lives.
59. Political and corporate leaders are ambitious corporate parents. The corporate parenting board has continued to provide oversight and challenge on behalf of children. Leaders recognise and understand the ever-changing and more complex issues children in care and care leavers face. As a result, they are in the process of updating Sheffield's corporate parenting strategy. This is being informed by a recent 'Bright Spots' survey (a survey of the views of children in care in Sheffield).

60. A focus on participation in Sheffield is a strength. The views of children in care and care leavers inform service development to help ensure that leaders get things right for children. Sheffield's impressive Youth Voice and Influence Service workers actively and influentially hold leaders and corporate parents to account through reverse scrutiny and challenge. Examples of challenges made include the quality of housing for care leavers, access to mental health services for care leavers, and the language used in social work records, all of which are priorities for the council.
61. Senior leaders have a good understanding of services in Sheffield. A recently updated self-evaluation accurately reflects the quality and impact of practice and informs service priorities, such as placement sufficiency for children with complex needs and the quality of in-house children's homes.
62. A well-developed range of quality assurance activities, including auditing alongside social workers, with moderation, provides senior leaders with an effective line of sight to frontline practice. Learning and themes from audits, shared with the workforce via a monthly 'quality matters' newsletter, which celebrates excellent practice as well as reporting on areas for improvement, is well received by staff. A lack of reflective discussions regarding audit findings in case supervision hinders learning opportunities for workers.
63. Leaders and managers use a range of performance information at different tiers of the organisation to understand performance and respond to any identified areas for improvement. In some discrete areas of practice, this is not enabling leaders to have a comprehensive and accurate oversight of practice, for example regarding children in the PLO process, use of return home interviews, and systems to ensure that all children have an up-to-date chronology. Leaders are aware of this and credible plans are already underway to address these areas for improvement.
64. Frontline management oversight of children's assessments and plans is effective. Frequent case supervision provides social workers with guidance regarding case progression. Staff report feeling well supported by their line managers and the oversight provided helps prevent children's plans from drifting. Supervision records do not always evidence opportunities for reflection. This can inhibit more creative and innovative practice.
65. Staff retention is enhanced by social workers having mostly manageable workloads and a comprehensive training and development offer. This includes a strong offer for newly qualified social workers, and opportunities for staff to develop their practice and skills to a high level and move into specialist or leadership roles. Senior leaders have created an environment where good social work practice is nurtured and celebrated.
66. The vast majority of staff are extremely positive about working in Sheffield. Staff report that leaders are visible and accessible. They feel valued and are proud to work in Sheffield.



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