

Somerset County Council

Reinspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection date: 7 November 2017 to 30 November 2017

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Children's services in Somerset require improvement to be good	
1. Children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance	Requires improvement

Executive summary

Since the last inspection in 2015, when Somerset children's services were judged as inadequate overall, the local authority has made steady progress in improving the quality of services that children and young people receive. Senior leaders have worked effectively with an improvement partner, and they have created a culture of openness and willingness to learn that supports further improvement.

Increased oversight by elected members provides additional scrutiny and challenge. Services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, while requiring further improvement to be good, have improved from a very low starting point. Children who require adoption receive a good service.

An experienced and committed director of children's services (DCS) has appropriately focused on engaging partner agencies in improvement and, at a senior level, there is good engagement and understanding of the practice issues. This is not always replicated in the multi-agency responses that children receive, and too many children's circumstances have to be escalated to senior leaders for effective action by partners, especially health and the police.

While no children were found to be at immediate risk of harm during this inspection, the quality of practice remains variable and managers do not always challenge poor practice. Children's assessments and plans remain inconsistent, and do not adequately capture children's cultural and identity needs. Social workers do not update assessments regularly enough.

The turnover of staff and managers has been reduced and there has been significant investment in creating an environment that enables good practice to flourish. This includes smaller caseloads for social workers and increased frontline manager capacity. While necessary, these changes in staffing have hampered relationships with social workers, particularly for those children who have been looked after for some time. This has slowed down the progression of their plans.

Leaders have improved early help services. When children first need a social work service, the thresholds are clear and consistent, and children receive a timely and proportionate response. However, child protection enquiries are not always appropriately child focused. Multi-agency meetings to protect children are not sufficiently focused on risk reduction. Scrutiny and challenge by child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers (IROs) do not always prevent delay for children or raise practice standards. Few children have access to an independent advocate in the child protection service. Responses to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are not sufficiently rigorous to ensure that all are appropriately supported.

Decisions for children coming into care are appropriate and mostly timely. More recent practice demonstrates good planning for very young children, who benefit from fostering for adoption placements. This means that permanence is achieved quickly, with the minimum of moves. There is good 'edge of care' work to prevent

children from coming into care, and the local authority is expanding this to support children to return home from care. The quality of court work is good. Pre-proceedings work is less effective in supporting parents to understand concerns and what needs to change. Assessments are not always appropriately used to inform decisions about children who return home from care and, as a result, plans for a few children are not sufficiently clear about the support needed to sustain their return home.

Most children looked after live in homes that meet their needs well. Fostering services are improving, but there are not enough foster homes for children whose needs are complex. As a result, too many children experience moves before they find the right home. Senior leaders have rightly prioritised investment in resources to improve sufficiency. However, although the local authority has focused on improving commissioning arrangements, this has not yet resulted in all children receiving a timely service and there is little joint commissioning with partner agencies.

Children looked after do not always achieve their full potential, and the quality of personal education plans is not consistently good enough. Health assessments for children take too long when they first become looked after and care leavers do not always know important details about their health history. There is no prioritisation of child and adolescent mental health services for children looked after, and not all children have their emotional health needs met in a timely way. The investment in emotional well-being services, while positive, is too recent to measure the difference that services are making for children. The local authority needs to do more with partners to ensure that there is appropriate support for children's health needs.

Responses to children experiencing sexual exploitation are effective in reducing risk for individual children, but the quality of return home interviews for children who go missing from home or care does not contribute to good risk analysis. The local authority's plans for improving this service need to accelerate to ensure that there is sufficient strategic analysis of risk, with a collectively shared and determined approach by partners, to reduce risks for all children.

Adoption services are good and timely, and include effective use of fostering for adoption for a wide range of children. Adopters and birth families receive a range of effective support services. While there is good learning from adoption breakdowns prior to a final order, breakdowns following this are not considered. This is a missed opportunity to improve practice in order to enhance the sustainability of all adoptions. Personal advisers support care leavers well. However, care leavers do not have consistently challenging targets, particularly around the development of their independent living skills and supporting them into employment, education or training.

While the local authority has been successful in ensuring that basic practice standards are met, and that children are safe, it recognises that it must increase capacity in the senior leadership team so that the current pace of change is

maintained and accelerated further. This reflects the scale of improvement required since the last inspection.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area¹

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates three children's homes. Two were judged to be good and one was judged to require improvement in their most recent Ofsted inspections.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in January 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
- Overall effectiveness: inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: inadequate
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: inadequate
 - Adoption performance: requires improvement
 - Experiences and progress of care leavers: inadequate
 - Leadership, management and governance: inadequate.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since March 2015.
- The chief executive has been in post since May 2014.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has been in post since July 2012.
- The local authority uses the relationship-based model of social work, based on 'Signs of Safety'.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 110,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Somerset. This is 20% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 15% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 11% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 10% (the national average is 13%).

¹ The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report, and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 4% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Mixed ethnicity and Asian.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 7% (the national average is 20%)
 - in secondary schools is 5% (the national average is 16%).

Child protection in this area

- At 7 November 2017, 2,480 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children’s service. This is a reduction from 3,109 children at 31 March 2017.
- At 7 November 2017, 433 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is an increase from 413 at 31 March 2017.
- At 7 November 2017, seven children lived in privately arranged fostering placements. This is an increase from the most recently published data for 31 March 2015, which was suppressed.
- Since the last inspection, 10 serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and five serious case reviews have been completed or were ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 7 November 2017, 495 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 45 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 475 (43 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
 - 140 (or 28%) live outside the local authority area
 - 52 live in residential children’s homes, of whom 27% live out of the authority area
 - six live in residential special schools,² of whom 83% live out of the authority area
 - 363 live with foster families, of whom 26% live out of the authority area
 - 14 live with parents, of whom four live out of the authority area
 - 19 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:

² These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

- there have been 32 adoptions
- 76 children became the subject of special guardianship orders
- 237 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 5% subsequently returned to be looked after
- five children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
- 20 children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses in multiple occupation.

Recommendations

1. Ensure that capacity in the senior management team is sufficient to address the operational issues that have resulted in inconsistencies in social work practice.
2. Ensure that the scrutiny and oversight of practice provided by managers, child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers are effective in achieving positive change for children.
3. Ensure that all plans and reviews focus on improving outcomes for children and young people and are informed by an up-to-date, holistic assessment of need that includes their ethnicity, identity and cultural needs.
4. Develop effective systems with partner agencies to ensure that appropriate support and oversight take place of all children kept in police custody.
5. Improve the quality and effectiveness of strategy discussions by ensuring that joint investigations are appropriately planned, with timely completion of actions, and that contingency planning is clear.
6. When children go missing, ensure that return home interviews are timely and of sufficiently good quality to inform individual planning for children and wider risk-reduction strategies.
7. Ensure that there is consistent use of tools for all children who may be at risk of sexual exploitation to improve safety planning and inform trend and risk analysis by senior managers.
8. Ensure that children and young people within the child protection process have timely access to advocacy services.
9. Ensure that all homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are appropriately advised of their entitlement to become looked after, and that those that require it are actively supported as children in need.
10. Improve the timeliness and standards of social work practice relating to families in pre-proceedings work in order to help parents to understand the concerns regarding their children and make improvements.
11. Ensure that sufficient foster homes are available for children to meet their needs, and that a range of quality placement options are available to them.
12. Ensure that children's initial health assessments are timely, and that the emotional and mental health needs of care leavers and children looked after are recognised and addressed.
13. Ensure that care leavers receive support to live independently at a time that is appropriate to their individual needs, and that all care leavers are engaged in some purposeful activity that supports them in accessing education, employment or training.

Summary for children and young people

- Services for children who need help in Somerset are getting better. Council leaders and staff have worked hard so that when most children and their families need help, they receive it quickly. Although services are better, there is still more work to do to ensure that all children receive a good service.
- Children are kept safe because social workers act quickly to protect them when they are at risk of harm.
- Assessments for some children need to include more information about them and their families, with plans that are clear so that children and families know what needs to change to make things better.
- Social workers and managers make the right decisions about which children need protection and when children are not able to live at home with their parents. When a few children return home, they do not always have sufficient help to make sure that things are better for them.
- Managers and other agencies have worked hard to understand how many local children are at risk of sexual exploitation, and they support them well to reduce risks.
- More work needs to be done to make sure that, when children go missing, they have an opportunity to talk to an independent adult soon after their return. This will help adults to understand the reasons for children going missing, and to prevent it from happening again.
- Some children looked after live a long way from home and some children have to move several times as there are not enough suitable options.
- Social workers are good at finding the right families for children who need adoption quickly. Children have plenty of help with settling in quickly, and are able to live with their brothers and sisters.
- Young people leaving care need more information about their health and medical needs, and too many are not in education, employment or training. They do not always have the right help to make sure that they are able to live independently. Staff keep in contact with them, though, and young people know where to go for help when they need it.
- Senior managers have plans to keep on improving services for children. Plenty of training is arranged for social workers and other professionals who work with children, to make sure that they understand the best ways to help children and their families.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Requires improvement to be good

Summary

Since the last inspection, early help services in Somerset have improved. The majority of families now receive responsive and effective support when needs first emerge. Families affected by domestic abuse, substance misuse or poor parental mental health have access to a range of good early help and specialist services. When early help does not improve children’s circumstances, the step up to a social work service is timely and informed by an up-to-date assessment of need. Children who require a statutory social work service receive a timely and proportionate response to their identified needs.

Children at risk of harm are identified appropriately and swift action is taken to ensure that they are protected. However, strategy discussions do not always include clear contingency planning, and children sometimes need to tell their stories a number of times due to the unavailability of the police to conduct joint investigations. Social workers are not routinely involved in subsequent police interviews of children, and this delays safety planning and means that there is not effective joint working.

Despite staff turnover, most children receive regular visits from social workers who know them well. Good-quality direct work and the effective engagement of parents enable social workers to gain a comprehensive understanding of children’s experiences. Children’s assessments and plans are improving, but their quality is too variable and they do not always lead to interventions that improve children’s circumstances quickly enough.

Initial child protection and review conferences are timely and well attended by partner agencies, but partners do not actively contribute to safety planning for all children. Child protection conferences are not consistently effective in identifying all risks to individual children in a family, to inform planning. While scrutiny of practice by child protection chairs is increasingly evident, this does not yet routinely lead to improved practice or better outcomes for children. Very few children have access to advocacy services.

Effective multi-agency actions safeguard children who are at high risk of sexual exploitation. Responses to children who go missing are more variable. The quality and timeliness of return home interviews are inconsistent and the interviews do not routinely inform risk assessments for children or lead to a strategic analysis.

Responses with regard to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are not sufficiently rigorous to ensure that their needs are fully known and that all young people who need it are given support by the local authority.

Inspection findings

14. Since the last inspection, services for children in need of help and protection have significantly improved. Social work practice is stronger and children's safety is promoted well. However, the quality of social work practice overall is not consistently good.
15. Early help services in Somerset have improved, yet are not fully established across the partnership. However, the majority of families benefit from responsive early help services that are effective in reducing risk. Practitioners successfully support families who are living with domestic abuse, poor parental mental health and substance misuse, through the provision of targeted and universal interventions. Delays in allocation mean that a small number of families do not get the help that they need soon enough and their difficulties increase, requiring statutory intervention.
16. Early help assessments and plans are improving in quality. However, they are still too variable and not all are sufficiently focused on actions for improving children's outcomes. Assessments do not always analyse children's experiences sufficiently and not all risks are clearly articulated. Plans do not consistently address the needs identified in assessments, or what families need to achieve within specific timescales.
17. When children are first identified as needing help and protection, they receive an effective response. Partners understand the thresholds for intervention. The majority of partners and professionals seek consent appropriately and refer without delay. Child protection concerns receive a timely response and the application of thresholds in First Response, the local authority's contact referral and assessment service, is consistent and appropriate.
18. Somerset has improved its out-of-hours arrangements to ensure that children are protected. The emergency duty team responds effectively to the needs of children and families. They work closely with children's social care and the police to ensure the timely sharing of information and the immediate protection of children.

19. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is now established, with good engagement of partners in the initial stages of child protection enquiries. Strategy discussions are timely and lead to appropriate decision-making, and outcomes are proportionate to levels of concern. However, discussions lack contingency planning and meetings do not always consider what information is to be shared with parents. Planning for joint enquiries by the police and social workers is not always effective due to the unavailability of police. Although social workers visit children to ensure that their immediate safeguarding needs are met, some children have to tell their stories a number of times. During the inspection, the local authority took action to escalate these incidents to police senior managers to ensure that joint investigations were undertaken in order to prevent this from happening. Social workers are not involved in achieving best evidence interviews of children, and delays in the sharing of information regarding the outcome of police investigations hamper decision-making and safeguarding planning for children. (Recommendation)
20. While the local authority knows and supports well the children who are remanded to court, it has not identified other children who are kept in police custody. As a result, assessments of these children's circumstances have not been undertaken, and their needs have not been ascertained. (Recommendation)
21. Children in need of targeted support, including disabled children and children on the edge of care, receive proportionate and sensitive support to meet their needs. There are intensive intervention services available for nine- to 17-year-olds who are at risk of becoming looked after, and the majority of families are supported effectively to continue to care appropriately for their children.
22. The quality of assessments is improving, with a focus on strengths and risks. While assessments inform work with families that improves outcomes for children, they are not always sufficiently analytical or detailed. A few assessments do not take account of family history to ensure that children's needs are fully understood. The needs and risks of each child within a family group are not always sufficiently differentiated. In the vast majority of assessments, children's identity and ethnicity needs are not fully considered.
23. Overall, most unborn babies benefit from timely assessment and intervention. In a few examples, inspectors found an absence of active pre-birth assessments or multi-agency actions. As a result there was insufficient time to promote change through direct work and emergency responses were then required for these children.
24. Most social workers see children regularly and know them well. Good-quality direct work and the persistent engagement of parents ensure that social workers have a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences. Increasingly effective social work interventions, particularly by newly qualified social workers, are leading to improved outcomes for children and their families.

25. Timely responses to the escalation of risk for almost all children ensure that children are protected. However, turnover in the social care workforce means that some children, particularly those experiencing neglect, have waited too long before action was taken to improve their circumstances. While the local authority, together with partners, is developing a range of tools and guidance to equip professionals better in the early identification of and response to child neglect, responses to children experiencing neglect are too inconsistent.
26. Although child protection conferences are timely and include partner agencies, they are not always effective in addressing delay for a small number of children who have experienced long-standing neglect. While agencies attend conferences and core groups, they do not always actively participate and the contribution of partners to planning is not always clear. Too few children benefit from access to advocacy for child protection conferences, and this is a missed opportunity to maximise their voice and understand the experiences of children in need of protection. (Recommendation)
27. Child in need reviews have improved in effectiveness, and result in a coordinated response to children's assessed needs. They ensure that appropriate support services are provided when statutory social work intervention is no longer needed. Families receive the help that they need, with an appropriate step down to early help services when children's circumstances change.
28. The quality of supervision and management oversight is not yet consistently good. While staff report good management support, supervision is not sufficiently regular or effective in reviewing overall progress for all children. Management direction is not always clear or sufficient to address weaknesses. As a result, changes in children's circumstances are not always fully explored and, for a small number of children, this has led to delay in taking action to meet their needs.
29. A variety of preventative and support services provide good help to families who are affected by domestic abuse, substance misuse and poor parental mental health. Partner agencies work well together to identify children who are exposed to domestic abuse. Multi-agency risk assessment conference arrangements are well established and effective. However, children and young people do not benefit from specific services that support them to build resilience and recover from their experiences of living with domestic abuse, and this is a gap in support and help available.
30. Operational multi-agency arrangements for overseeing and reviewing children who regularly go missing require improvement. The collation of information gathered from individual episodes of 'missing' is not yet informing local mapping sufficiently to reduce risks. Return home interviews are not always timely or of sufficient quality to consistently identify changing risks or inform safety planning for children. (Recommendation)

31. The effective coordination and oversight of children identified as being at high risk of sexual exploitation reduce risks for children. Children at lower levels of risk do not receive the same level of oversight by senior managers, and the use of screening and risk assessments tools is too inconsistent. While no children were identified by inspectors as being at immediate risk as a result of these deficits, screening tools are not always used well to inform planning interventions in order to reduce risk. (Recommendation)
32. Effective arrangements identify and monitor children who are missing education. Timely notifications and risk assessments ensure that families are contacted and offered support by the local authority when the arrangements commence. There is no routine support programme provided, but children who receive targeted support are cross-referenced to support information sharing and the provision of services.
33. The majority of assessments of the immediate needs of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are timely, and plans appropriately address the identified areas of need. However, homeless young people are not routinely considered to be children in need, or clearly advised of their right to become looked after. As a result, consideration of the longer-term planning needs of these young people does not benefit from social work oversight or support. (Recommendation)
34. Private fostering arrangements are suitably monitored and supported by Somerset. Assessments are mostly timely. However, they do not always capture children's voices effectively.
35. The local authority identifies and investigates allegations of abuse against professionals effectively. Good promotion of the role and function of the designated officer across the partnership and agencies ensures that appropriate referrals are made. Action plans and case recording are comprehensive and the designated officer tracks cases well to ensure that investigations are well coordinated and responsive to the needs of children.

<p>The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence</p>	<p>Requires improvement</p>
<p>Summary</p> <p>Services for children looked after in Somerset have made good progress since the last inspection, but still require improvement due to a legacy of poor practice and a lack of suitable homes for children with complex needs that has not yet been fully addressed. A strong corporate parenting culture in Somerset has raised the profile of the needs of children looked after, and is resulting in higher aspirations and ambitions than previously. Children who are looked after feel cared for and prioritised by their carers. However, changes in social workers mean that some children experience delay in their plans being progressed.</p> <p>Children become looked after when they need to be and, for the vast majority of children, this happens at the right time. Children on the edge of coming into local authority care receive good, intensive support to enable them to remain with their families. Children returning home from care do not always receive the same high-quality service, which means that for a very small number of children their return home is not sustained. While most children live in good placements where their needs are well met, placement matching and the sufficiency of placements need improving so that children do not experience avoidable moves before they live in good, stable placements that maintain their local support networks.</p> <p>The quality of most assessments of children looked after is good, although the identity needs of children are not always well considered. Assessments are not updated regularly and social workers do not routinely update care plans following significant changes to children’s circumstances. Most plans are not specific enough to measure progress, and this can create delay in progressing planning. The improvement to permanence planning has resulted in much better use of special guardianship, but further work is required to improve the timeliness of permanence for children in long-term fostering.</p> <p>Children looked after do not achieve the same level of educational attainment as their peers, and the quality of personal education plans is not consistently good. Health assessments do not identify children’s initial health needs quickly enough, and written health plans are not always available.</p> <p>Adoption services are good, with good use of fostering for adoption, and Somerset supports adopters well. Post-adoption support is comprehensive, although the learning from adoption breakdowns could be improved.</p> <p>Practitioners support care leavers well, but do not always set consistently challenging targets for care leavers, particularly around the development of independent living skills and getting back into employment, education or training. In addition, pathway plans are not helpful for young people.</p>	

Inspection findings

36. Services for children looked after in Somerset have improved since the last inspection. There is now good attention to meeting children's needs and children are safer. However, there is still too much inconsistency in the quality of practice, so not all children receive a good service.
37. When children need to be looked after, the decisions are mostly appropriate. For very young babies, there are mainly timely decisions to issue proceedings at birth. Good identification of fostering or residential assessment placements results in very young children being safeguarded and effective parallel planning commencing. Older children at risk of coming into care receive a responsive, intensive 'edge of care' service from Team 8, the adolescent intervention team, which has a high rate of success. The local authority is investing in expanding this very successful service to support more young people to remain at home. When children return home from care, decisions are not always informed by risk assessments or plans that detail the support on offer to sustain their return. This has resulted in a few children returning to circumstances in which change has not been sustained, and coming back into care.
38. The majority of assessments of children looked after are of good quality and capture well their emotional health needs, including the trauma experienced by children. Parents' and children's voices are clear throughout. Brother and sister relationships and contact with the people important to children are well considered. However, not all assessments are up-to-date and some assessments do not consider children's identity needs sufficiently to inform their plans and the support provided. Plans are not always informed by assessments or updated following significant changes. The lack of specific targets or milestones creates delay for some children in progressing their plans.
39. Social workers do not use family group conferences effectively to support good care planning. The local authority accepts that practice in relation to family and friends carers does not always recognise situations in which children are looked after, as opposed to living in a private family arrangement. During the inspection, the local authority reviewed children cared for by relatives to ensure that, where appropriate, children's entitlement to becoming looked after is recognised.

40. The timeliness of care proceedings has significantly improved to an average of 31 weeks from a high of 60 weeks, but does not yet meet the expected timescale of 26 weeks. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) reports an improving quality of evidence in recent months. Social work statements to court seen by inspectors are child centred, with good analysis, and family history is used effectively. However, pre-proceedings work is less effective. The local authority mostly uses letters before proceedings within the Public Law Outline (PLO) as a gateway to initiating proceedings. These are not sufficiently child focused, making it difficult for families to understand and address concerns. Letters are not always clear about what has been done to support families, and they lack detail regarding how further support will be offered to families. (Recommendation)
41. Placement matching when children first become looked after or need to move requires improvement. Children and parents are not involved in placement choice and planning and, too often, they receive little information prior to placement. The recruitment strategy for increasing the number of foster carers is not yet resulting in all children who require a fostering placement being offered a timely and suitable match. Placement plans are not good enough. Social workers do not complete them in a timely way, and this may leave carers vulnerable in terms of fully understanding a child's care needs and how to meet them.
42. Long-term placement stability for children looked after in Somerset has deteriorated due to a lack of sufficiency of placements. To address this, senior leaders have increased the resources for supporting children to remain in their placements. While placement stability meetings identify factors that are leading to placement instability, they do not always result in clear, action-based, outcome-focused support plans. Managers do not yet review any themes from children's placements that end prematurely and social workers are not proactively planning to prevent further future placement breakdowns. (Recommendation)
43. Fostering services are improving, and there are a range of initiatives designed to increase the in-house offer and raise the quality of the service. A range of specialist fostering schemes are available, and contribute to positive outcomes for some children, including supporting children with attachment difficulties. Foster carers benefit from a significant range of training and support activities, and they exercise delegated authority on an individual basis to help them to make day-to-day decisions for children. Foster carers' assessments are generally of a good quality, and annual reviews clearly inform foster carers' training and developments.
44. Almost all children live in homes that meet their needs. They have regular contact with their social workers, who know them well. In a small minority of cases, social workers combined visits with other meetings and did not see children alone or in their homes. This is poor practice.

45. Case recording does not always demonstrate the quality of the relationships that the social workers have with children. While social workers undertake some sensitive direct work with children to ascertain their wishes and feelings, it is not always clear how well direct work informs assessments and planning. Life-story work is not routinely undertaken to assist children's understanding of their history, unless they have an adoption plan.
46. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have manageable caseloads and maintain contact with children between reviews. They review children's care plans regularly, and more frequently when risks increase. Most reviews for children looked after are child centred, and there is good engagement with parents and carers. However, a small minority result in poor-quality minutes and recommendations that do not aid good planning for children. A lack of consistent challenge by IROs means that a small proportion of reviews do not progress permanence planning sufficiently for children in long-term fostering. There are some good examples of working with children, and the use of the 'Mind of my own' app has significantly increased children's communication with social workers. Inspectors saw that good individual work is being done in order to understand children's communication needs, and that IROs are planning reviews differently as a result.
47. Permanence planning has improved since the last inspection and inspectors saw timely permanent fostering matches that were informed by good matching reports. Since the last inspection, the local authority has significantly increased the use of special guardianship for children who cannot live with their parents, and this reflects a strong focus on permanence. The quality of assessments and support plans is not consistently good enough, and special guardians do not receive the same level of high-quality support to sustain placements long term that adopters receive. (Recommendation)
48. Independent visitor and advocacy services are well established. Children looked after who are placed at a distance from Somerset are given priority for a service, if this is required. Supporting children to benefit from advocacy is a priority for the local authority, and a communication toolbox assists children and young people who do not use verbal communication. However, not all children looked after understand the complaints process, and when children make complaints the responses are not always timely and their quality is variable.
49. Risks in relation to child sexual exploitation and missing from care are recognised and there is appropriate use of strategy discussions, management oversight and disruption activity for those children who are deemed to be at highest risk. The quality and timeliness of return home interviews are still too inconsistent and the interviews do not routinely inform children's safety planning. However, inspectors saw that some good-quality work being undertaken by a specialist social worker in the youth offending team was reducing risk in relation to sexually harmful behaviour.

50. Health assessments for children looked after are not always timely, and performance regarding the timeliness of initial health assessments has deteriorated. However, inspectors saw no children whose immediate health needs were not being addressed due to this delay. Performance in relation to reviewing health assessments is much better, and the majority of children looked after have an up-to-date health assessment. However, carers identify that they do not always receive a copy of the health plan, which makes it more difficult for them to be clear about how they are to meet children's health needs. At the time of inspection, there were 13 children, all living at a distance from Somerset, who had not had a health assessment. Short-term funding has been identified to ensure that these children's needs are met, but the local authority recognises that a more sustainable solution is required to ensure that the ongoing health needs of children who live at a distance are met.
(Recommendation)
51. Children looked after are not given priority for child and adolescent mental health services, and the local authority cannot be assured that all of their emotional health needs are met well. The recent introduction of the emotional and well-being team is a positive step, but it is too early to see improved outcomes for all children. There is good, child centred practice with regard to making early plans for transition in the cases of older young people who have diagnosed mental illnesses. Improving the links with adult services to ensure smooth transitions for children is a priority, and the recent introduction of a complex transitions panel is supporting this.
52. Children looked after in Somerset do not achieve as well at school as their peers and, although improving, their educational attainment from their starting points is still not good enough. Children at key stage 4 achieve on average one grade lower than expected. Personal education plans are not consistently good across the county and the use of pupil premium is not measured to ensure that it is used effectively to improve children's attainment. (Recommendation)
53. The virtual headteacher is setting high expectations for children looked after and sharing this ethos with all partners who work with Somerset children, resulting in more focused attention on improving attendance and attainment. School attendance for all children looked after requires improvement. Last year it was below 90%. The virtual school staff now have a more intense focus on each individual child and, at the time of the inspection, attendance had improved. The virtual school does not currently have sufficient oversight of all children looked after, particularly those in early years settings and in Years 12 and 13. Too many children in Years 12 and 13 are not in education, employment or training. The virtual headteacher and senior managers have recognised this and actions are now in place to improve this for the current year.

54. The virtual headteacher carefully monitors children who are looked after on bespoke timetables and children who are missing from education, to ensure that they return to full-time education as soon as possible. Virtual school staff ensure that alternative provision supports the development of children, and that children have positive and worthwhile experiences. Somerset provides good support for schools to enable them to recognise and tackle bullying in all forms.
55. The participation of children looked after is highly valued by senior leaders and managers. Children are well represented by the Somerset in care council. The website is child centred and reaches a wide audience, particularly those children who are placed at distance from Somerset. The link with the 'Unstoppables' group, a forum for children who have special educational needs and disabilities, encourages inclusive participation. Children looked after are involved in a wide range of opportunities to influence local practice, including training in corporate parenting for county councillors, staff recruitment and producing films on the importance of supervision and what makes a good social worker. Their work links clearly with corporate parenting priorities. Younger children have fewer opportunities to contribute, and the local authority recognises this as an area for improvement.

<p>The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good</p>
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56. Strong adoption services in Somerset ensure successful permanence for a wide range of children, and result in a high number of children benefiting from adoption. In the last 12 months, 32 children moved to their adoptive families.
57. Effective planning and the early identification of children in need of adoption mean that the timeliness of adoption has continued to improve, and is now good. Over half of the children take fewer than 14 months to move in with their adoptive families from entering care. A combination of successful tracking and strong links between the adoption team and social workers means that children who require adoption progress well through the adoption processes with the minimum of delay. Social workers and managers know their children well, and have achieved positive permanence outcomes for older children, brothers and sisters together and children with complex needs.
58. Family finding is swift and effective, ensuring that timely matches are achieved for the vast majority of children without delay. The local authority uses a wide range of local and national family-finding strategies, and social workers make prompt referrals to family-finding services for children who would benefit from a wider search. At the time of inspection, all children with a plan for adoption had potential matches identified. Where children's plans have changed from adoption, this is the result of court decisions where family members have become known late in the planning process.

59. Fostering for adoption is an area of considerable strength in Somerset, and increasing numbers of adopters choose this as an option in order to minimise unnecessary moves for children. At the time of inspection, over a quarter of all children in the adoption process were benefiting from fostering for adoption placements.
60. Recruitment processes for adopters are thorough, and produce a wide range of adopters to support choice and good matching with children's needs. The service has now addressed the delays in adopter assessments caused by capacity issues and the lack of timeliness of checks and adoption medicals. There is effective tracking of timeliness, and any current assessments that are outside of timescales are due to appropriate, adopter-led delays.
61. Social workers understand children's needs well and the quality of child permanence reports has improved. Recent reports clearly include children's views and their cultural needs, and provide a clear picture of their personalities and their relationships with brothers and sisters. Assessments to consider whether brothers and sisters should be adopted together are timely and of a good quality. This provides clear analysis that informs planning and matching to prospective adoptive families.
62. The matching of children to their new parents is effective. Adopter reports consider the parenting skills of adopters and how these will meet children's identified needs; they also clearly identify any potential vulnerabilities. Social workers prepare adopters well for their children. Prospective adopters benefit from meeting the medical adviser prior to matching, to discuss their children's physical, emotional and psychological needs for the future. Adoption support plans are carefully individualised to meet children's needs.
63. A committed and effective adoption panel provides strong, independent scrutiny of adoption practice. Members have a wide range of relevant backgrounds and experience. The panel supports the service to improve and reviews the learning from any adoption breakdowns. In the last two years, there have been three adoption placement breakdowns prior to an adoption order being made. Disruption meetings carefully scrutinise all professional practice and the team has now implemented the learning from these breakdowns. However, the service does not systematically gather the learning on adoption breakdowns post adoption orders. This is a lost opportunity to learn lessons to improve practice in order to enhance the sustainability of all adoption placements.
(Recommendation)

64. Adopters told inspectors that they are prepared well for caring for their children. The comprehensive preparation course provides adopters with a good understanding of the needs of adopted children, and insight into their own skills. They value highly the support of the team through the different stages of the process. Social workers support children well in making the transition to their new families. Timely child-focused and creative life-story books enable adopters to support their children to understand their experiences. Later-life letters provide clarity for children on why they were adopted, and bring their histories to life to ensure that they understand decisions made about them.
65. Adopted children benefit from high-quality, meaningful contact with their birth families. Adoption workers support both indirect and direct contact effectively, where appropriate. Social workers carefully assess all contact, taking account of children's individual circumstances. As a result, children are sensitively supported to maintain relationships that are important to their identities as they grow up.
66. Adoption support is a strength. The services offered are wide ranging, and support adopted children and their families into adulthood and beyond. The adoption and permanence team undertakes well-timed and sensitive work, helping families to meet the challenges. Good use is made of the adoption support fund, which ensures that families have immediate access to a variety of high-quality, professional specialist services that are local to them. Social workers coordinate post-adoption support effectively, using their skills and training in relevant therapeutic techniques. Adopters spoke positively about the skilled support that they receive from social workers throughout their adoption journeys.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement to be good

67. Services for care leavers have improved significantly from the very low baseline at the last inspection. Senior leaders have recently made improvements to ensure that the service is responsive to young people's needs, but care leavers do not all receive a consistently good service.
68. Personal advisers know young people well, and are persistent in their efforts to engage them. At the time of the inspection, only two of the 336 care leavers were not in touch with the service, and this was their own choice. Most care leavers have good relationships with their workers, but a few find it difficult to contact them, especially out of hours, when they most need support. Personal advisers work alongside social workers to support young people with specific tasks until they reach 18 years old, when the leaving care service takes full responsibility for them. This ensures that young people feel supported by people who they already know well.

69. Workers respond well to care leavers when there are difficulties, and targeted training in the past year has increased their skills and ability to work with those care leavers who are harder to engage. Personal advisers regularly visit care leavers in prison, supporting them to use their time effectively. They ensure that care leavers who misuse substances and alcohol receive specialist support to reduce the risks to their health. Young parents have a dedicated social worker in the leaving care team to support them to develop their skills in parenting.
70. Care leavers who met with inspectors do not understand the purpose of their pathway plans. They feel that the process is too long and they do not see the benefit of these plans. Some plans are not reviewed well enough to measure progress. Managers prioritised pathway planning training to raise the quality of pathway plans after the monitoring visit in August 2017 and, as a result, the very recent pathway plans show a better focus on the young person. Targets are more understandable and achievable. However, too many plans do not have consistently challenging targets for care leavers, particularly in the development of independent living skills and supporting them back into employment, education or training. (Recommendation)
71. Not enough care leavers are engaged in purposeful activity and not all personal advisers have high enough expectations for their care leavers. Almost a third of care leavers are not in employment, education or training, although this figure has been reduced considerably in the last year. A few care leavers did not feel sufficiently supported in their endeavours. However, increasing numbers of care leavers are participating in apprenticeships or training programmes, and 22 care leavers registered this year. Support from the local authority has increased with six apprenticeships provided by them, and managers within the service are working with industry to increase the opportunities, yet there is more to do. Senior leaders and managers recognise that they need to provide better support to engage more care leavers in focused activity. (Recommendation)
72. The health needs of care leavers are not considered or addressed sufficiently. The designated nurse for looked after children does not routinely provide health advice and guidance for care leavers who are over 18 years, and there are no specialist areas of support for care leavers. Young people access services through their general practitioners, with the support of their leaving care workers. In a few cases, young people have waited too long for appropriate services to become available. Most care leavers do not receive sufficient information about their health history, even when they have known allergies, and not all care leavers are aware of their immunisation history. (Recommendation)
73. For those young people who need to transition from the child and adolescent mental health services to adult mental health services, there is appropriate support, and transitions are well planned and effective in supporting continuity of care. But for those care leavers without a medical diagnosis and care plan, the support is not well defined and they can wait too long for interventions to meet their emotional health needs.

74. Care leavers do not always understand their entitlements, but the leaving care team ensures that young people access appropriate services and it supports them in receiving their benefits. Somerset provides additional support to ensure that care leavers have what they need. Care leavers have an incentive scheme to positively encourage young people in education and training. Managers are working with district councils to encourage them to reduce the council tax for all care leavers when in their own accommodation in Somerset.
75. Not all care leavers feel well prepared to live independently and too many young people have tenancy breakdowns. Recently, commissioned housing providers offer a range of tiered support options, to build confidence and independence skills in care leavers. Personal advisers provide support for care leavers by giving financial advice and help with budgeting and shopping, when needed. But senior managers recognise the need to develop a stronger independence strategy to ensure that all care leavers make the transition to independent living successfully, at a pace that is right for them. (Recommendation)
76. The local authority has started to provide a much better range of appropriate accommodation options for care leavers since the last inspection, and the vast majority of young people are in suitable accommodation. 'Staying put' arrangements are used well, and 26 care leavers were living with their former foster carers at the time of the inspection. Care leavers report that they feel safe, and that they like the accommodation choices provided. Although the choice of accommodation is better, a few young people say that they are having to wait too long for their accommodation, especially those who need higher levels of support.
77. Somerset has a lively leaving care council, which is well supported and has good links with the corporate parenting board. Its achievements include website development and organising the highly regarded annual awards evening. However, care leavers do not feel involved with the design of the care leaver service, and are not sufficiently consulted to inform its development. The local authority recognises that there is more to do to engage care leavers in the development of the service to ensure that it is more responsive to young people.

Leadership, management and governance	Requires improvement to be good
<p>Summary</p> <p>Since 2015, under the leadership of a committed director of children’s services and deputy director, the local authority has prioritised effectively, ensuring that children in Somerset are safe and receive timely services. Starting from a very low base of inadequate practice, senior leaders have ensured that services for children have improved at every stage of their involvement with the local authority. Effective work with improvement partners and a clear understanding of progress mean that leaders are fully aware of the further work that is required in order to ensure that children consistently receive a good service. Although all services have improved, the pace of change and the quality of practice remain too variable, and current capacity in the senior leadership team to support further improvement at a pace is overstretched.</p> <p>Overarching plans appropriately prioritise children’s needs, and strategic planning for children has improved significantly. A much-improved corporate parenting board, a committed lead member for children and a separate scrutiny panel challenge and hold officers to account effectively. Commissioning arrangements are not strong and there is insufficient joint commissioning to ensure that children’s needs can be met. The sufficiency of placements for children looked after remains a particular challenge in Somerset and has not improved, despite scrutiny, effort and investment in resources.</p> <p>Partnership working is improving, with clear senior commitment to addressing issues which affect children. However, senior commitment across agencies is not yet leading to consistent good practice with individual children, and some long-standing issues remain unresolved. These include timely health assessments, addressing delays in children’s emotional needs being met and timely joint investigations with police.</p> <p>Work is currently being done to improve strategic responses to children who go missing from home or care and those at risk of child sexual exploitation. This needs to be accelerated to ensure that agencies learn from children and respond to trends and emerging risks, and that there is a proactive and shared response to reducing risks for children.</p> <p>The local authority has invested significantly by creating working conditions that support good practice. Most social workers now have manageable caseloads and regular supervision. Staff turnover has been reduced and a good range of learning, support and development opportunities are available to staff. However, further work is required to ensure that both management oversight of practice and quality assurance of casework lead to improved outcomes for children.</p>	

Inspection findings

78. Senior managers and leaders in Somerset have led improvement effectively since the last inspection in 2015, when all services, except adoption, were judged to be inadequate. A permanent DCS and a deputy director have provided consistent and skilled senior leadership since their appointments in 2015. After many years of instability and inadequacy, these two significant roles have offered continuity and clarity, resulting in measurable progress for children.
79. The DCS and the deputy director have modelled a clear and unwavering focus on getting the basics right in order to improve services for children. They have welcomed and worked well with their improvement partner, and know their services well. A range of panels ensure that thresholds are appropriately applied and that senior leaders oversee standards of practice. While this has provided a helpful short-term span of tight senior control, the deputy director is overburdened with too many operational tasks and direct reports. The local authority recognises the need for additional senior management support to strengthen operational capacity, to lead on strategic tasks and to improve the quality of social work practice for children. (Recommendation)
80. The LSCB chair, chief executive, DCS and deputy director engage well with partners to improve services for children. Senior leaders understand well the link between good multi-agency work and good services for children. The development of the MASH is an example of how well this works. However, there is still more to do to address weaknesses in multi-agency practice. The time taken to meet the emotional health needs of children looked after and the delays in police investigations, requiring escalation to senior leaders before appropriate action is taken, are examples of the poorer practice seen in joint work, and these require a more coherent and effective joint strategy. (Recommendation)
81. A significant area of improvement for children since the single inspection in 2015 has been the strengthening of corporate challenge and scrutiny. Following the inspection, a separate scrutiny panel for children was set up to provide a dedicated focus on children. This has been effective and has raised the profile of children's needs, while appropriately challenging officers and scrutinising practice and outcomes. This panel considers priority areas of practice alongside detailed data and reports. It acts as an effective forum through which to scrutinise the work on behalf of children.

82. The lead member clearly champions children's needs and there is a much stronger corporate sense of responsibility for children. As a result, the local authority has successfully refreshed and revised the corporate parenting board, provided training to the majority of councillors and developed thriving and lively Children in Care Councils. Aspirations for children have increased within children's services, but there is more to do to ensure that all the departments of the local authority share this responsibility, and that children looked after are clearly prioritised for training and development opportunities and wider council services.
83. Progress has been appropriately steered by clear written plans. Initially guided in 2015 by a clear, overarching nine-point improvement plan, the strategic direction is now addressing the consistency of practice alongside compliance issues. The current effective children's and young people's plan is closely aligned to other strategic plans, including the joint strategic needs analysis (JSNA).
84. Leaders and managers have a good understanding of their local communities and needs. The regularly updated JSNA identifies children's needs and is of sufficient range and detail to inform the current three-year children's and young people's plan for 2016 to 2019. The Health and Wellbeing Board offers an appropriate separate consideration of children's needs. The work of the LSCB means that partner agencies now understand the thresholds better, and that they are more consistently applied.
85. Although there has been considerable work done, and all service areas have improved, the progress of improvement is inconsistent, with some services requiring a more urgent pace. Early help, although improved, requires further integration with partners to increase its capacity. The local authority has not systematically evaluated the impact of the early help offer on meeting the needs of children and their families.
86. Commissioning arrangements are not yet sufficiently established, or producing all of the required outcomes. While there are some notably successful areas of commissioned services, including the new arrangements for care leavers, the provision of placements is not yet sufficient to meet the needs of all children in Somerset. The local authority has begun to address this deficit through recent investment in additional senior commissioning posts and the alignment of the placements team to the commissioning service. Plans need accelerating to provide greater choice and better-quality placement options for children. There are insufficient fostering placements available for children and too many poor quality providers, requiring some children to move at short notice. Work done with providers to stimulate the market, and to monitor and develop the quality homes that children need, requires a stronger, dedicated focus.
(Recommendation)

87. A significant amount of work has taken place since the last inspection to ensure that partners better understand and address the risks for children at risk of child sexual exploitation or going missing. Inspectors saw positive work being done in order to keep individual children safe, particularly those at the highest risk. Fortnightly meetings that review children who have been missing, child sexual exploitation champions distributed in each of the geographical areas in Somerset and sexual exploitation network meetings are all contributing to developing practice. However, the strategic response to child sexual exploitation and children going missing is not sufficiently evolved. Scrutiny at senior management level to identify patterns or trends for all children at risk of exploitation is insufficient. The DCS and partners have recognised this and invested in a project lead, who helpfully chaired Somerset's recent serious-case review panel relating to child sexual exploitation. This work is appropriately supporting the development of a more focused strategy, with clear action plans and a more coherent pathway for children, particularly those at lower levels of intervention. (Recommendation)
88. Multi-agency meetings to protect children are not sufficiently focused on reducing risk and scrutiny, and the challenge by child protection chairs and IROs does not always prevent delay for children. Chairs of conferences have high caseloads, and this has hampered their ability to progress improvements in social work practice and identify whether risks are reducing for children. The challenge from child protection chairs and IROs is not sufficient to be effective, and a more robust and questioning style is required to avoid unnecessary delay for some children. (Recommendation)
89. Quality assurance and audit processes have developed a culture of scrutiny and challenge with a positive attitude to learning. An extensive range of processes are undertaken and include quality performance review meetings, peer 'diagnostics' of individual services, the regular auditing of cases, sample audits by managers and team manager 'stocktakes'. A bespoke business data framework informs a clear and comprehensive suite of performance reporting documents, which leads to a good understanding of what is happening for children. However, some aspects of the audit process are too complex, and there is now declining compliance in their completion. Managers understand that the priority must now be on improving the quality of practice. There is more to do to engage social workers in the audit process, to embed improvements and to increase social workers' understanding of what constitutes consistently good practice for children.
90. The local authority has an improved and positive working relationship with Cafcass and the local family justice board. Court timeliness is improving and the quality of court work is much improved.

91. Senior managers have needed to recruit, train and support new workforce. The ongoing challenge of ensuring that social work posts are filled, and that the standard of practice is good enough, has been a particularly difficult one. This has required continuous effort and energy in creative recruitment. Initiatives, including 'try before you apply' and an active presence at recruitment fairs, have proved successful and have resulted in there being only 12 posts currently unfilled. Newer staff spoke very positively about the recruitment process. The service is still too reliant on locum social workers and team managers and, while this situation has considerably improved, the local authority recognises that ensuring there is a stable, skilled workforce remains an area for improvement.
92. Staff report being happy in their work in Somerset and there has been a clear, positive shift in morale and culture since the last inspection. An annual staff survey and a range of emotional well-being initiatives are all demonstrating an investment in staff. A mindfulness course proved highly effective in improving staff support and retention.
93. Investment in the workforce in Somerset has seen a 20% increase in social workers, with smaller teams. The expanded role of consultant social workers is supporting and enhancing the skills of social workers. Caseloads are manageable for the majority of staff, with a target of 14 and a current average of 16, although a minority of social workers have a much higher caseload than this. Newly qualified social workers who are in their assessed and supported year of employment receive good support and speak positively about their experiences. They benefit from guaranteed smaller caseloads, and Somerset has been highly successful in retaining newly qualified social workers over the last two years. The turnover rate for social workers, although much improved, is still having an impact on children, particularly on children looked after, who have experienced too many changes in workers.
94. Supervision takes place regularly for the majority of social workers, although the quality of this varies considerably and it is not consistently reflective. Management oversight of work is also too variable and not all social workers benefit from consistently clear guidance and direction. The local authority needs to ensure that all frontline managers have the right skills to develop and support social workers. (Recommendation)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

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The inspection team consisted of seven of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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