

Inspection of Somerset local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 18 to 29 July 2022

Lead inspector: Kendra Bell, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Children and families receive good-quality services in Somerset. The director of children's services and senior leaders across the council work together effectively to improve services for children and have responded well to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The council is committed to driving up standards for Somerset's children and is rightly proud of the significant progress it has made since the last inspection in 2017. Investment in management capacity has resulted in greater consistency of practice and preventative services are making a real difference for children. Children's identities are particularly well understood by professionals, and children are central to their plans. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) and child protection chairs progress plans effectively for children. Care leavers receive a high level of support that really benefits them. Senior leaders have responded effectively to the challenges faced in recruiting and retaining staff.

Senior leaders also know well those areas of practice that need to be strengthened. A small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes and there is a lack of appropriate emergency care. Although the local authority offers all children who go missing a return home interview, only a quarter of children are successfully engaged in these discussions. Some children have less formal but meaningful conversations with their social worker or trusted adult at a later stage.

What needs to improve?

- Placement sufficiency, including for emergency admissions, for older children with complex needs.
- The take-up of return home interviews and use of data to inform individual and service planning.

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

1. When children need early support, they receive a timely and proportionate response from early help hub workers. Workers gather relevant information swiftly, to ensure that children's needs are identified and well understood. They consistently gain appropriate parental or carer consent and signpost children to the right services to meet their needs.
2. The quality of early help services provided to children by the Family Intervention Service (FIS) is strong. The service delivers a highly effective rapid response to children on the edge of care, which is successful in repairing relationships and preventing family breakdown, so helping many children to remain with their families. A team around the family approach provides effective multi-agency assessments, plans and targeted support. This helps parents and children to make positive changes. A clear transition between early help and statutory services, with a planned transfer process, helps children and families understand what is happening. For a small number of children, there is a short waiting list for early help intervention and support, although most of these cases are reviewed regularly by managers while waiting.
3. Children who need help and protection are referred to the first response team, which identifies risk and concern quickly. The triage system gathers key information swiftly from a wide range of partner agencies. Social workers are diligent in their enquiries. They routinely gain the views of fathers and non-resident parents. Parental consent is routinely sought and only dispensed with when absolutely necessary. Domestic abuse is identified well and responded to effectively in most children's cases. Strong management oversight at every stage ensures that children almost always receive timely support. The local authority has secured good engagement with partner agencies, who contribute well to information-sharing when children are first referred. For example, the new health role is contributing positively to triage processes and signposting children and families to health services that can best help them.
4. Child protection strategy meetings are timely and well attended by relevant agencies. Effective information-sharing leads to a proportionate response and relevant actions that help to protect children. However, for a very small proportion of children who are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, strategy meetings are not held. For most of these children, while further assessment and support is progressed and this helps to mitigate risk, a strategy

discussion could have resulted in earlier information-sharing and a shared understanding of risk and need, to help better target intervention and track progress.

5. When children need immediate help outside office hours, the emergency duty team responds effectively. The team takes protective and supportive action, drawing on the 24-hour edge of care and support service delivered by FIS to best support children within their family and prevent family breakdown.
6. The assessment of children's needs, including pre-birth assessment, is timely, comprehensive and informed well by children and their families. Partnership working is strong, with timely information-sharing to support good decision-making, and the creation of effective plans. Professionals understand children's changing needs by regularly reviewing plans. Many children experience improvements and positive changes in their lives because of the support they receive. Social workers are skilled in working with children and motivating parents to recognise concerns and build on strengths. They make good use of the specialist knowledge and skills provided by adult services' practitioners across the service.
7. Child protection conferences take place within timescales and clearly evaluate risks to children. Plans set measurable actions and are succinct, and parents can understand what they need to do to improve their children's lives. Children are the focus of conferences, and they are well supported to share their views and have good access to an advocacy service. Conference chairs engage skillfully with family members, helping them to focus on making the changes needed, as well as being part of the decision-making process. The information shared with children and parents is sensitively written without minimising risk. Well-attended reviews and core groups regularly check to ensure that plans are reducing harm to children. Child protection chairs are diligent in their oversight of the effectiveness of children's child protection plans.
8. Family group conferencing is used widely to help to support children and families. It is very effective in bringing family members together to create sustainable solutions for children and their families.
9. Social workers build relationships of trust with children. Children's views are sought by social workers in purposeful visits and individualised direct work. The identity of children is well understood by their social workers, and they help children to understand themselves. Disabled children's needs are understood well and reviewed frequently. They are supported by workers who visit them regularly and understand how to communicate with them to gather their wishes. Assessments are comprehensive and lead to succinct plans that bring together a range of effective support, including short-break services, to meet disabled children's needs and to encourage social activities and new experiences.

10. There is robust management oversight of work with children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Many families are supported to make positive changes that avoid the need for court proceedings. For those children who do need the protection of a court order, this work is used to help ensure that this is achieved swiftly for the majority of children. Letters to parents are clear about what needs to change and support their understanding and engagement.
11. When children return to home or care after a period of being missing, the local authority is only managing to engage about a quarter of them in a return home interview, despite such interviews being offered to all children. When children have not taken part in a formal discussion, workers discuss incidents when children go missing with parents and carers to help understand risk, what children are running from, running to, and where they go. This information is often shared with schools. For some children, their social workers also hold conversations at a later stage that help to inform a 'trigger plan' that contains helpful information about children's vulnerabilities and actions to be taken if they go missing again. However, it is not clear how many children benefit from such conversations, especially those who do not have a social worker.
12. Children at risk of extra-familial harm are supported well by a range of services that help to protect them by diverting them away from risk and into positive activities. Decisive legal action is taken to help protect children when needed. A dedicated lead role for this area of work helps bring consistency to practice and informs the wider intelligence work being undertaken. Children are appropriately referred to the national referral mechanism, and those vulnerable to extremism are identified and appropriate steps taken to help protect them.
13. The small number of children who are privately fostered receive an effective response. They are visited and supported regularly by a private fostering social worker.
14. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive a timely response. Those who are unable to return home are made aware of their rights and entitlements, including the option of coming into care, and they are provided with accommodation that meets their needs. A clear joint housing protocol is used effectively to support children into the most suitable accommodation. When children need to come into care, this is recognised and appropriate action taken.
15. Robust systems are in place to identify a small number of children who are not in education, and they are helped successfully to return. The local authority has good oversight of children who are home educated, supporting them back into education when this is in their best interests, and providing educational and safeguarding support when necessary.
16. The local authority designated officers provide a timely and robust response when there are allegations against professionals. They are capable and

experienced, and recent additional capacity has helped to strengthen the service further.

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

17. Decisions for children to come into care are timely and appropriate. An increasing number of children are settled in care, live in stable homes, and are making positive progress in their lives. They enjoy many hobbies and activity trips that develop their skills and widen their experiences.
18. Social workers visit children regularly and many build caring and nurturing relationships. They are creative in gathering the views of children through direct work. A small number of children have experienced several changes of worker, but many have had the same worker over a long period of time and have developed meaningful relationships with them. An increasing number of workers write their records to the child, which are personalised and child-focused. Children are also supported well by advocates and independent visitors who help to extend their support networks and to share their views.
19. Children's health needs, including their emotional health and dental needs, are speedily understood when they come into care. These health needs are reviewed regularly as part of their plans. Children access a wide range of health services, including emotional well-being support, to meet their needs.
20. Children regularly attend their care reviews. IROs visit children and spend time with them to get to know them well. IROs have regular oversight of children's care plans and care reviews, which are written in such a way that they are meaningful to the individual child and focus on the child's progress and achievements. IROs ensure that progress is made in achieving the aims for children as set out in their plans and set high standards. Consequently, they have a strong and positive impact on the quality of care for children.
21. Permanence is considered for many children at an early stage. Many benefit from permanent homes being identified for them in a timely manner through adoption and special guardianship. Careful thought is also given to family time for children and to support for birth parents. An increasing number of children live with their long-term carers, and this is recognised and celebrated. Diligent work is undertaken by social workers to find suitable permanent care options for children within their extended family whenever possible. Disabled children live in a range of care arrangements, including with wider family and with specialist carers who are committed to them and understand their complex health needs. However, for a small number of children, formally recognising and celebrating their care as permanent is taking too long. Senior leaders recognise this and are working progressively to ensure all children's permanence plans are agreed at the earliest opportunity.

22. Children are supported to return home to parents in a planned, measured way when this is in their best interests, and with appropriate supervision and support around the child.
23. Social workers and IROs help children to enjoy family time with parents, brothers and sisters, and wider family and friends, to support their identity and emotional well-being. Plans are flexible, respond to children's changing needs and are adjusted if family situations change.
24. The virtual school is aspirational for children and places their needs at the centre of the school. Personal education plans are detailed and regularly review the progress children make in all aspects of their learning and development. For a small number of children, targets could be more specific, to better help children to understand and focus on their goals. Pupil premium funding is used well to help source the extra help children need and provides targeted and specialist support.
25. Life-story work for children who achieve permanence through adoption and long-term care helps them to make sense of their lives. It is sensitively undertaken, using the best format for the child, and can include photos. However, for some children who are remaining in care, life-story work has not yet started. Most of these children do get some help to understand their situations, but do not routinely benefit from the fullest account of their care and childhood experiences that life-story work would provide as quickly as they could.
26. A small number of older children with particularly complex needs are living in unregistered children's homes. Their needs are understood and the local authority takes action to mitigate the potential negative impact of living in an unregistered children's home. However, many of these arrangements are not best matched to these children's needs and levels of risk and are not in their best interests. Senior leaders are taking action to identify suitable registered homes as soon as possible.
27. Children in care aged 16 or 17 who are living in semi-independent accommodation enjoy positive relationships with staff. The quality of accommodation and support is monitored well by senior managers, and regular communication takes place between staff and social workers about the progress children are making or if their needs have changed. The day-to-day plans for some children do not always fully reflect what will be provided by the supported accommodation. This means that, for some children, they are not always clear about the help they will or can receive.
28. Assessments and reviews of foster carers are timely and of a good quality. Foster carers access a range of training to help develop their skills and care. They receive regular supervision and have safe care plans that are detailed, personalised and child-centred. Foster carers speak highly of the consistent support they receive and have positive relationships with workers.

29. Somerset is part of the regional adoption agency (Adopt SouthWest). Through its work with the agency, the local authority is providing a good range of services that achieve good outcomes for children who need adoptive families.
30. Care leavers receive a consistently high standard of support from leaving care workers, who are strong and effective advocates for them. Workers visit care leavers regularly and build enduring and trusted relationships with them. Workers provide ongoing support which routinely continues when care leavers are past 21 years of age, including for care leavers who are neither disabled nor in education.
31. Pathway plans are written with care leavers and are reviewed regularly. Plans often contain an exceptionally strong understanding and insight into care leavers' identity, including their identity as a care leaver. Care leavers are supported well with their emotional and physical health and have good access to their health histories. Care leavers are supported by a wide range of agencies that come together to create effective support networks.
32. An increasing number of care leavers are in employment, education or training. Care leavers are encouraged into higher education and are well supported when studying at this level. Leaving care workers actively support and encourage care leavers back into employment, training or education by drawing on a good range of support and positive activities to help them.
33. Care leavers are supported with grants and flexible financial help when things get difficult for them. Leaving care workers step in and help as a good parent would. Care leavers are helped to develop their day-to-day living skills and how to manage money and live successfully as young adults.
34. Almost all care leavers live in a range of suitable accommodation, including privately rented homes, council-owned housing and living with their former foster carers. A very small number who are facing homelessness are helped to find temporary solutions until suitable longer-term housing is secured. There are a broad range of accommodation options available for care leavers. This is supported using 'gold banding' in housing allocation to help care leavers secure their own accommodation.
35. Care leavers who have sought, or are seeking, asylum are provided with a high level of support, with suitable care and accommodation that meets their requirements well, including their cultural and religious needs. Workers are conscientious and understand care leavers' needs and the impact of their experiences.

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

36. The director of children's services is committed to delivering the best services for children and is highly ambitious for children in Somerset. This ambition is

shared by staff across children's services and supported by the local authority's senior leaders. Political and corporate leaders are well informed about all aspects of children's services. As a result, there is a shared ownership across the council of the delivery of the services that support children and families to improve their lives, and considerable investment is supporting sustainable long-term improvement. Consequently, although not all of the local authority's plans are yet in place, and so for a few children there is more to do, a large majority of children are benefiting from consistently good-quality services.

37. Leaders have ensured that children are extensively engaged to help shape the future of children's services. They also consult widely and receive regular feedback, not only from children, but also from families and partner agencies. They use this to understand effectively the impact of services and to inform future service development. For example, 'The Unstoppables' is a group of children championing the views of disabled children, who are very successfully making their voices heard about how things can be improved for children.
38. Somerset County Council is an active and caring corporate parent with a well-structured corporate parenting board that is committed and effective. The board is reflective, holding itself and senior leaders accountable for the quality of care provided to children. Its work is enhanced by the openness and energy of the input from the children in care and care leaver councils. The annual achievement event is organised by the children in care and care leaver councils and is a really positive celebration of children's and young people's achievements. Care leavers take an important role in the commissioning of new services by using their insight and experiences to help create the best provision for children. The local authority is proactive in employing care leavers and in securing apprenticeships for them.
39. The local authority's scrutiny arrangements are used effectively to regularly review the progress being made for children, and are supported by strong engagement from senior corporate and political leaders. Well-established partnerships and strong strategic relationships ensure that arrangements for safeguarding are effective for children across Somerset. Work with health partners is effective in monitoring the impact of health services for children, including emotional well-being and mental health services. Appropriate action is taken to review services when the need for improvement is identified.
40. The director and his senior leadership team have a clear line of sight of the impact of services and the extent to which they are meeting the needs of children in Somerset. Strategic plans within the council and with partners are aligned to provide a clear pathway and programme to improve services. They welcome external advisers and peer challenge to develop learning and evaluate service developments and new practice models. The new 'Family Solutions Somerset' approach is a unique model for supporting children and families and brings together the practice framework with commissioned services. It is embedded and provides the foundation for children's services principles,

approach and practice. This has led to greater consistency of practice and is making a very positive difference to children and their families.

41. The inspection in 2017 highlighted that further improvement was needed to increase the range and number of care placements for children. Senior leaders have taken determined action to secure and increase capacity, but there remains a lack of sufficient appropriate registered care options for a few children, particularly older children with the most complex needs and those who come into care in an emergency. The long-term strategic plan to substantially increase local provision through a strategic partnership is well underway, but is not yet having an impact for all children.
42. A robust performance and quality management system is used well to understand and analyse the impact of services for children and to identify where improvement is needed or possible. However, for return home interviews, the data is not providing an accurate overview of performance and timeliness and is not capturing emerging trends to inform strategic planning.
43. An extensive cycle of quality management activity, including multi-agency evaluations, helps to support the swift identification of emerging themes and provides senior leaders with a good insight into practice. Although learning is taken back into the organisation to review impact, managers are not always using supervision following practice evaluations to explore learning with individual workers and to improve practice with children.
44. The stability of the workforce and recruitment of workers has been strengthened by leaders. Creative ways of supporting workers, innovative partnerships to grow the local workforce, and the use of national programmes and overseas recruitment are yielding positive results. Recently recruited overseas workers and newly qualified workers say that they feel supported and have a clear induction programme. Senior leaders are building an increasingly skilled and stable permanent workforce, who are growing in their professional experience to deliver skilled social work services to children and families.
45. There is a workforce culture of openness, support and respectful challenge in Somerset which helps workers to feel confident in their practice. Most workers enjoy working in Somerset. They value this positive culture and the high level of support provided by their managers and the local authority. They have access to a regular training programme that develops their knowledge and skills. Although a few teams are very busy at times, most staff have manageable workloads and feel well supported in their practice and in holding complex casework. They mostly benefit from regular individual supervision, frequent management guidance and reflective conversations that develop their practice and help drive progress and improvement for children.

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