

Inspection of Gloucestershire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 7 February 2022 to 18 February 2022

Lead inspector: Andrew Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Significant progress has been made in many areas of Gloucestershire's children's services since the last inspection in 2017, when the local authority was judged to be inadequate overall. However, services for children are not consistently good. Beginning from a very low base, there has been a relentless drive for improvement by both senior leaders and staff. This, along with significant financial investment and the backing of political leaders, has led to improved services that are now more effective in meeting the needs of children and families. As a result of these improvements to services and support for children, they are now better protected. Action to provide help and support is proportionate and timely. Children are no longer left in situations where they are known to be at immediate risk of significant harm without appropriate action being taken, nor are there any serious or widespread failures in the services provided to children.

The local authority has strengthened its quality and performance management arrangements, providing senior leaders with a good understanding of the quality and impact of practice. The Director of children's services has ensured that staff have been provided with a clear model of practice and of what is expected of them. Therefore, the majority of children now benefit from more timely effective interventions. Despite these improvements, there remains more to do to ensure that all children benefit from improved services.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness and application of consistent thresholds for child protection strategy meetings.
- The suitability of accommodation for care leavers to meet their needs, including to feel safe.
- The quality of case supervision and management.
- The timeliness with which personal advisers are allocated to children, to best support their transition into adulthood.
- How well IT systems support social workers to do their jobs.

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

1. Children and their families benefit from a comprehensive offer of early help services provided by the local authority. Children's early help assessments identify needs well, but subsequent plans are not always informed by sufficient or clear management direction. Early help plans identify the right outcomes and levels of support needed for children, although the quality of plans is not consistently strong. There are effective systems in place to ensure that children are stepped up or down between the thresholds in line with their needs.
2. Contacts to the Children's Single Point of Access (C-SPA), which receives initial contacts about children before they are assessed by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), are mostly timely when concerns arise about children's welfare. When children are referred to the C-SPA, this is dealt with in a timely way and decisions generally match their needs and risks.
3. Most children who have more complex needs receive timely responses from the MASH. The need for the consent of parents or older children is understood and sought or dispensed with appropriately. For those families needing help at weekends and overnight, the emergency duty team provides effective responses that are recorded well.
4. Decision-making in the MASH is mostly prompt, but managers who have the initial oversight of referrals about children do not record a clear rationale for decisions about next steps for social workers. This is a missed opportunity to ensure social workers consider all aspects of children's lives when planning interventions. Children's histories and previous local authority involvement are considered well by social workers when analysing information. As a result, most children and families receive the type and level of support that is appropriate to their needs and to the level of risk. Nevertheless, some children experience repeated contacts and referrals before they get the help they need.

5. A daily MASH meeting is effective in enabling multi-agency discussions to take place to plan actions to safeguard children who have been referred for a service overnight, or who have gone missing.
6. When safeguarding concerns are identified, managers do not ensure that consistent thresholds are applied to convene child protection strategy meetings and investigations. For newly referred children, strategy meetings are mostly timely. When children already have a social worker and new concerns emerge, there are sometimes delays in arranging child protection strategy meetings. When strategy meetings are held, they are well attended by partner agencies and make informed decisions for next steps. Actions are appropriate and include timescales that address immediate concerns, as well as safety planning.
7. Most children benefit from social work assessments that are timely and comprehensive and provide a strong sense of the child's experience. Social workers use the 'anchor principles of assessment' to provide them with a framework and focus for balancing family strengths and needs. Most consider family history, information from partners, children and families, with effective analysis of risks. As a result, subsequent child in need and child protection plans contain actions that are well matched to children's needs and circumstances. For a minority of children, assessments are not always completed in a timely way. Therefore, some children's experiences within their family are not understood early enough and their needs and risks not fully identified or responded to as quickly as they could be, for example when children are experiencing chronic neglect.
8. The threshold to proceed to an initial child protection conference is applied appropriately. Most child protection conferences benefit from consistent attendance by parents and key partner agencies and lead to plans that are detailed and focused. Core group meetings are used effectively to progress most children's plans, but for some children a lack of timescales in plans limits how well progression can be monitored. Children with a child protection plan are visited within timescales that match their individual circumstances and are mostly seen alone. However, changes in social worker and a lack of management oversight have led to delays in progressing child protection and child in need plans for some children.
9. For those children for whom concerns escalate, there are significant improvements since the time of the last inspection in the quality of senior manager oversight. The local authority is now also making better and more timely use of the pre-proceedings process that is used to strengthen the depth of support and rigour of oversight of work with children who may, without this enhanced level of intervention, need to become the subject of care proceedings. The service has been strengthened by the recent recruitment of case progression managers and the introduction of a panel to expedite plans for children. The impact has been to increase social workers' capacity to divert some children away from care proceedings appropriately and progressing those children who do need the legal protection of a court order in a timely manner.

10. Work with disabled children demonstrates an understanding of risk and need that is evidenced in assessments that are detailed and generally timely. There is a focus on the children's needs, leading to focused multi-agency plans that improve outcomes for children. However, for some disabled children, there are delays in progress with their child in need and child protection plans due to waiting lists for services.
11. Most social workers strive to establish positive, lasting working relationships with children and their families so that they know why an intervention is needed. Social workers are generally skilled at gathering the views of children using a range of age-appropriate tools. Although the turnover of staff in the workforce is much reduced since the time of the last inspection, some children experience too many changes of social worker. This has a negative impact on their ability to build lasting relationships with a consistent worker.
12. The frequency and quality of the case supervision received by social workers are variable. In too many children's cases, it lacks reflective analysis and sufficient management direction. Records are lacking in challenge where there is delay and rarely reflect children's experiences as well as they should. There are some much better examples that provide a strong sense of the child's experience, detailed analysis, and suitable next steps to advance a child's plan, but these are a minority.
13. Since the last inspection, strong and effective services to support some vulnerable groups of children have been developed. The response to children who are at risk of or who are experiencing criminal or sexual exploitation has improved since the development of the children's exploitation team. Regular multi-agency meetings oversee support to children through robust risk management planning, which leads to interventions that help reduce the likelihood of further incidents of exploitation. Children who go missing have workers who are persistent in completing return home interviews that include detailed conversations with children to inform safety plans that reduce risk effectively.
14. A team of family support workers provides responsive support to children and families on the edge of care and successfully diverts some children away from care. For children that do enter care, the decisions are appropriate, with clearly recorded management oversight. Social workers strive to identify homes for children quickly when family breakdown is considered likely.
15. There is a strong sense of shared responsibility for the most vulnerable children, across partner agencies and from frontline staff to the most senior managers. This is evident in the sense of urgency to address issues as soon as possible and in the procedures and systems that have been put in place to make this happen.
16. There has been a significant rise in the numbers of children who are electively home educated. Senior leaders are aware of this rise and of its causes. The processes in place to ensure that children are seen quickly and that their alternative education provision is assessed are appropriate. There is effective

work with partner agencies to support children to reintegrate into schools when this is appropriate.

17. For those children who are missing from education, senior leaders have again developed a strong and well-structured system to help to understand why they are missing education and to support their reintegration. There is an effective process that reviews all children missing education on a fortnightly basis, with no children removed from the list until they have been located or confirmed in other education provision. A wide range of local authority services are contacted to gather intelligence, allocate appropriate support, and carry out agreed actions.
18. Children aged 16 and 17 years old who present to the local authority as homeless are appropriately assessed. They are supported with reunification with their family when safe to do so or helped to secure appropriate help with accommodation. For those who need to come into care to secure their welfare, this is also achieved as quickly as it can be. The local authority is clear regarding its duties and responsibilities for this vulnerable group of children.
19. Allegations and concerns about professionals and volunteers who work with children are swiftly and effectively managed by the local authority designated officer (LADO). The LADO service provides a timely and supportive response to allegations, with a focus on the voice of the child within meetings.
20. For some children who are privately fostered as students with host families, arrangements are clear. For other children, there is a lack of clarity about children's living arrangements and what needs to happen. Most children experience a delay in initial visiting with no rationale as to why. There is a lack of manager oversight to address these issues to make improvements for children.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

21. Social workers understand the value of achieving permanent living arrangements as early as possible for children who cannot remain with their parents and work hard to achieve this. As far as is reasonably possible, all opportunities for children to remain within their immediate or extended family are exhausted before other options are pursued. However, while permanence for children is considered at the earliest opportunity, it is not always achieved quickly enough for some children.
22. Most children are living in homes with carers who understand their needs. Children are appropriately matched to carers, including family members, with viability assessments of family and friends completed promptly. However, there is not a sufficiently wide range and choice of placements available to meet the needs of all children in care, and, as a result, a small minority of children in larger family groups continue to live in unsuitable arrangements while the right home is found.

23. Many children benefit from careful planning to achieve a safe return home to their parents. For some, this includes a sound support plan endorsed by the court under a supervision order. For a minority of children, there is a lack of timely management oversight to approve these arrangements.
24. Children's care plans are mostly up to date and include clear arrangements for children to spend time with people who matter to them. A minority of children's plans lack focus on their specific needs and are built on generic actions rather than outcomes and aspirations for children.
25. Review meetings for children in care are regular and timely, with the relevant professionals and family members present. Children's views are well represented, mostly through the support of the independent reviewing officer (IRO), who generally spends time with them before the meeting. Reviews are written for children and use appropriate language in a nice way to explain some difficult situations in the child's life. Most actions agreed at reviews are specific to children's needs, have appropriate timescales and are accompanied by contingency plans. The oversight of IROs is consistently seen on children's records and this means that children's plans are closely monitored, and concerns escalated where there is drift and delay.
26. Children's family time is promoted, with social workers and IROs establishing children's wishes and feelings about who they want to see and how well family time is progressing. If arrangements are not in their best interest, family time is adapted to meet their needs.
27. When children have access to their life-story information, it is presented to them using a variety of tools that are child-focused and age-appropriate, with beautiful photos and images of all the people and pets that are important in children's lives. To prepare young children for adoption, they are given a transition book, which is a storybook using pictures of their favourite characters to help them understand why they live in foster care and to help children to understand their family and who their brothers and sisters live with if they are not remaining together. For most children who have been looked after for many years, there is very little evidence of life-story work to help them to understand their journeys into care or to assist them to make sense of any trauma they may have experienced before coming into care.
28. Children's later-life letters are generally not sufficiently sensitively written. A child or adult reading their letter later in life may well struggle to clearly understand their journey into and through care. Although letters do provide a basic chronological account of key life events, they do little to make sense of them, to place them in a wider context or to draw out the positive experiences, achievements and relationships in children's lives.
29. Social workers in Gloucestershire are passionate about doing the best for the children they work with. They understand their needs, are enthusiastic about their progress and encourage them in opportunities for success. The majority of children are seen regularly and alone by their social worker, and this helps

children understand why they are in care. For most children, their records are detailed, with visits that are purposeful and contain the views of children.

30. Some children experience too many changes of social worker. This does not help them to build a trusting relationship with their social worker. The frequency and quality of visits to children are overly dependent on the individual commitment and capacity of social workers. More recently, and through the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers have been consistent in their visits to children. For some older children who may have been more reluctant to meet with or to get to know their social workers, this has required real persistence and commitment by workers. This has enabled children to build relationships of trust with them.
31. The majority of children's healthcare needs are met, and their routine health appointments are mostly up to date. Questionnaires are used effectively to identify areas of support for most children's emotional well-being, and this also helps workers and professionals to target what is the best resource to meet their needs. Most children with needs relating to either their emotional wellbeing or mental health receive suitable alternative support if they have to wait too long for a service from child and adolescent mental health services (CAHMS).
32. Children make good educational progress in care with support from the virtual school. Children's personal education plans (PEPs) provide a strong sense of children's voices, and this helps to shape appropriate action that is making a positive difference for children. However, the quality of PEPs remains mixed and many are weak. Although the format has improved and quality assurance is established, the headteacher of the virtual school is clear that there are still areas to improve to bring all plans up to the standard of the best.
33. The recruitment of foster carers since the last inspection has continued to improve. The increase in foster carers has been offset by an increase in the numbers of children needing to be looked after, meaning that sufficiency of foster placements for children remains a challenge. Some children have experienced more moves than they should have as a result of being placed in an emergency placement at the point of coming into care due to the lack of a suitable placement being available at that point, and then waiting to move when one becomes available.
34. Some children who are in stable long-term placements also wait too long to be formally matched for permanence with their carers. This means there is delay in them having the opportunity to celebrate this important event and in gaining the long-term stability and emotional security that it represents.
35. Planning for children with a plan of adoption is a strength. Working through the regional adoption agency, the numbers of children leaving care to join adoptive families have increased. There is a greater consideration for early permanence placements, as well as targeted recruitment resulting in more brothers and sisters being placed together for adoption.
36. Social workers have insight into the impact of adoption for birth parents and refer them to appropriate services for support. However, due to the high

numbers of babies being placed for adoption, mothers who have experienced removals of children from their care do not receive a structured programme of support to help prevent the likelihood of repeated removals.

37. Personal advisers (PAs) are not allocated to care experienced young people¹ until after their 18th birthday. This reduces the ability of PAs to build an early meaningful relationship, to fully understand young people's history or to support them early enough to prepare for transition into adulthood as well as they could. Some young people do not have an allocated PA; where this is the case, social workers do remain involved with them post-18, providing some continuity in relationships for young people.
38. PAs mostly build positive relationships with the young people they work with and know them well. Most PAs are tenacious in maintaining contact and visiting young people. At times of crisis, the frequency is increased, and PAs link young people up with other relevant support services. This helps young people to manage and work through the challenges of transition to adulthood more safely and successfully.
39. Pathway plans are mostly comprehensive, up to date and detailed and contain the views of young people. There are a small number that are not always updated when young people's circumstances change. Plans are written to them to help them understand their progress and they also identify risks. While most pathway plans are completed collaboratively with young people, some do not routinely include the input of other involved agencies and parties, and this is a missed opportunity to gather partnership views and to share information.
40. Most care experienced young people are supported to access funding for help with purchasing the essential things they may need in life. Young people are provided with access to technology, with PAs obtaining laptops and mobile phones, along with paying for internet access. Young people are made aware of the local offer through online information and leaflets. Care experienced young people spoken to by inspectors were not aware of the offer, nor was there evidence of their awareness in their electronic case files.
41. Most young people are in the right accommodation and are supported to find suitable accommodation when this is not the case. A few care experienced young people over 18 do not live in suitable accommodation. On a very few occasions this has included bed and breakfast accommodation. While PAs, social workers and other professionals make attempts to resolve young people's housing needs as soon as possible, a few young people live in such unsuitable accommodation for too long.
42. Young people living in supported accommodation generally receive appropriate support to help them prepare and transition into their own independent living accommodation. This is a stepping-stone to help support them to achieve their

¹ Instead of the term 'care leavers', this report uses the term 'care experienced young people', at the request of young people in Gloucestershire.

own tenancy. Many young people benefit from extended support networks to help them, including housing advice workers and mentors from a local project that provides practical and emotional support, through visiting care experienced young people in their homes.

43. Not all care experienced young people feel safe where they are living when in unsuitable accommodation. The local authority makes every effort to provide alternative accommodation and there is evidence in young people's records of frequent management oversight and reflection. Where necessary, high-risk planning meetings are held, including for those young people considered to be at risk of exploitation. These involve the right professionals and care experienced young people are encouraged to attend, to understand risks and formulate plans. However, when young people live in homes of multiple occupancy, the potential risks that may be posed to them and others from shared living are not fully considered or recorded, and this has the potential to limit the effectiveness of the support they are receiving.
44. PAs are aspirational for young people and place a strong emphasis on encouraging education, employment and training (EET). A large majority of care experienced young people are in EET, with some young people going on to further education and university. Young people can access mentoring, counselling, financial support, and drop-in facilities, and many take advantage of this support. Although a higher percentage of care experienced young people in Gloucestershire are in EET than in similar local authorities, senior leaders are committed to doing even better for young people, improving the experiences of care experienced young people even further. In particular, they have identified that there is more to do to engage the care experienced young people with the most complex needs.
45. Care experienced young people's physical and emotional health needs are mostly met well through a good range of health services. Young people are encouraged to access their health histories, and most are aware of how to do this.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

46. The local authority has made significant progress in many areas in improving the quality of services since the time of the last inspection in 2017 and children in Gloucestershire are now better protected. Significant progress has been made against the vast majority of recommendations made at the last inspection and this has resulted in substantial improvements to services and better outcomes for children. This progress has been achieved against the backdrop of the additional pressures and challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
47. Although driven by the Director of children's services, all senior leaders, including the chief executive and political leaders, have recognised and prioritised the needs of children. A collective ownership of the serious shortfalls that were identified at the last inspection has been the spur for an ambitious improvement

plan supported by substantial financial investment. Despite the progress made, there remain some key areas of practice where these improvements are yet to make a tangible or a sufficient difference for all children and young people. For example, services for care experienced young people.

48. Ensuring that there is a stable, sufficient and suitably skilled and experienced workforce remains a challenge in some areas, for example the teams of social workers who work with children subject to child in need and child protection plans. As a result, some children still experience too many changes of worker. Senior leaders have made important progress in stabilising a fragile workforce. There is now a much higher percentage of permanent staff and a reduced reliance on agency social workers. This improved stability is benefiting children, who are now more likely to have the chance to build a relationship with a consistent social worker with a manageable caseload. Social workers have been recruited through a broad variety of methods, such as recruitment from overseas, step up to social work programmes and apprenticeships.
49. A highly successful social work academy has been effective in supporting and developing social workers who are in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment. An additional financial incentive to staff in the teams that work with children on child in need and child protection plans is beginning to make an important difference to the retention of social workers in these teams.
50. The quality of social work supervision across teams is inconsistent and needs to improve. Although supervision is generally timely, it does not consistently provide social workers with time to reflect on the progress they are making for individual children or always give them the added direction they need from their managers. As a consequence, not all social workers are being supported well enough to provide consistently good practice and improve outcomes for all children.
51. The local authority has put in place a performance and quality management structure that enables senior managers to have a better understanding of practice. The auditing of practice takes place on a regular basis and is supported by an effective moderation process. Senior leaders have provided staff with a clear picture of what good practice looks like and of what is expected of them. This improvement culture has been embedded with staff through training. They now know what is expected of them and this in turn is having a positive impact on the quality of practice and the difference they make for children. This was not the case at the last inspection.
52. Senior leaders are aware there is more to do for this to be consistent across the workforce and there remain significant areas for improvement to ensure that more children are receiving a good standard of services. Actions identified by audits are not always followed through and managers do not monitor implementation to ensure that learning from audits is used to drive progress. When learning is identified from audits that the local authority rates as stronger, there is currently no system for using this to further improve services for those children whose cases have been audited. This is a lost opportunity.

53. Relationships with key partner agencies have strengthened since the last inspection. There is effective partnership working between key partners and social workers for children vulnerable to exploitation and going missing and, as a result, the response to such concerns is often strong. Effective sharing of information enables the mapping of people of concern with locations where children may be exposed to exploitation.
54. As a corporate parent, the local authority is committed to the children of Gloucestershire. This commitment is seen in a number of areas, including a more considered approach and plan for ensuring a sufficient range of placement options for children. This ongoing work, undertaken with both health and other local authority partners, with a particular emphasis on children with complex needs for whom it is sometimes more difficult to find good placements, such as children who have been in, or may require, secure accommodation, children with complex physical and mental health needs and those with autism spectrum disorder. The development of a specialist in-house provision is a positive illustration of this planning.
55. Placement sufficiency remains a challenge. Despite the strengthened approach to sufficiency, the impact of the improvements achieved to date is not being felt by all children and young people. A few children are waiting too long for placements that are well matched to their needs. At the time of the inspection, there was one child in an unregistered children's home.
56. Senior leaders and elected members are aware of the problems relating to the accuracy of performance data linked to poor IT systems and infrastructure and have made efforts to mitigate the shortfalls. However, there remains a gap in what can be delivered to ensure that frontline managers have consistent access to up-to-date information that enables them to do their jobs effectively. This continues to have an impact on progress. These challenges also have a negative impact on the generally positive morale of staff. They are a very real frustration for staff as they can sometimes hamper their ability to do their jobs as efficiently and effectively as they otherwise might.

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