

Cabinet

7 December 2021

Feedback from Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (27th September to 8th October 2021)

For Decision

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): All

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

Report Author: Claire Shiels

Title: Corporate Director, Commissioning, Quality and Partnerships

Tel: 013053224682

Email: Claire.shiels@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

Cabinet is asked to note and consider Ofsted's published report of the recent Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in Dorset and the next steps.

Reason for Recommendation:

To ensure Cabinet are briefed on the outcome of this inspection and the planned next steps.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 An Inspection of Dorset Local Authority Children's Services took place from 27th September 2021 to 8th October 2021. The inspection was undertaken as part of Ofsted's framework for inspecting services for children. Her Majesty's Inspectors carried out the inspection under section 136(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA).
- 1.2 This was the first full inspection of all Dorset children's services since the inception of the new Unitary Authority in April 2019. The last full

inspection of all services for children in Dorset was undertaken in 2016 and through Dorset's predecessor council, Dorset County Council.

1.3 Inspectors were on site in Dorset Council offices for two weeks to undertake an extensive and thorough review of: Overall effectiveness; the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection; the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers; the impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families. The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services is a graded inspection. Inspectors make their graded judgements on a 4-point scale: Outstanding; good; requires improvement to be good; inadequate.

1.4 Ofsted have judged Dorset Children's Services as follows:

Overall Effectiveness	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
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding

1.5 Ofsted have determined services for children and families in Dorset are of good quality and are continuing to improve, finding that senior leadership has a proven determination to give every child in Dorset a brighter future. They have acknowledged the strong political and corporate commitment to improvement, the pride that staff take in their work and that good work is expected, delivered and celebrated. Inspectors have noted the scaffolding for further improvement is firmly in place.

1.6 Dorset Council is now one of:

- Only 17% of Local Authorities (26 out of 151) who have received an outstanding judgement for the impact on leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- 34% of Local Authorities (51 out of 151) judged to be good or outstanding for overall effectiveness with other judgements good or outstanding.
- 50% of Local Authorities (76 out of 151) to be judged either good or outstanding for their overall effectiveness.

1.7 The inspection has followed an extensive programme of work to strengthen and improve services for vulnerable children in Dorset, through the Dorset partnership Strengthening Services Plan with oversight by the multi-agency executive level Strengthening Services Board. Progress has been reported to Elected Members throughout the journey of

improvement. These improvements have been seen by inspectors and acknowledged throughout the published report of the Inspection.

- 1.8 The strong commitment to continuous improvement is embedded in services for children in Dorset, within children's services and the wider partnership. One area for improvement has been identified in this inspection: *Oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of emergency or temporary accommodation.*
- 1.9 This area for improvement and wider learning from this inspection is already being incorporated into a new plan that will support the partnership in its next phase to deliver excellence for children and families in Dorset.
- 1.10 In accordance with the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (Inspection of Local Authorities) Regulations 2007, the local authority is required to write and submit an action plan to Ofsted that responds to the findings in the Inspection report within 70 working days of receiving the final inspection report (by 2nd March 2022).

2. Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

Good quality children's services lay the foundations for essential health and wellbeing of children, young people, and families.

4. Climate implications

There are no climate implications arising directly from this report.

5. Other Implications

This report provides feedback on external regulatory assurance of safeguarding services for children and Corporate Parenting arrangements.

6. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

N/A

8. Appendices

Ofsted's Report of Inspection of Dorset Local Authority Children's Services
[Ofsted | Dorset](#)

9. Background Papers

Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACs) Framework [Inspecting local authority children's services - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services)

10. Introduction

10.1 An Inspection of Dorset Local Authority Children's Services took place from 27th September 2021 to 8th October 2021. The inspection was undertaken as part of Ofsted's framework for inspecting services for children. Her Majesty's Inspectors carried out the inspection under section 136(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA). This was the first full inspection of all Dorset children's services since the inception of the new Unitary Authority in April 2019.

11. Background

- 11.1 The last full inspection of all services for children in Dorset was undertaken in 2016 and through the Dorset's predecessor council, Dorset County Council. The 2016 Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers found services to be requiring improvement to be good.
- 11.2 In 2018 a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation, children associated with gangs and at risk of exploitation and children missing from home, care or education in Dorset, also under Dorset's predecessor council, Dorset County Council, identified areas of priority action and areas for improvement for the partnership.
- 11.3 An Ofsted Focused Visit to Children's Services in October 2019, reviewing the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, identified areas for improvement.
- 11.4 Culture of Self-assessment and Strengthening Services – In January 2020 Dorset Council Children's Services embarked on and implemented a rigorous process of Self-Evaluation of its services for vulnerable children as part of its annual strategic planning cycle. A Self-Evaluation in February 2020 informed the development of the Strengthening Services Plan. The Self-Evaluation was further updated in February 2021 to inform Dorset's Annual Conversation with Ofsted. This was presented to People Health and Scrutiny Committee (20th April 2021) and was presented to Cabinet on the 18th May 2021. A further report providing progress since the implementation of the Dorset Children Thrive model was reported to People Health and Scrutiny Committee on the 20th September 2021.

- 11.5 The Strengthening Services Plan brought together short and medium-term actions that the partnership needed to take to strengthen and improve services for vulnerable children and families in Dorset. Robust governance arrangements were established to ensure the plan was delivered with rigour and pace. Close monitoring arrangements were put into place to ensure improvements were sustained and embedded.
- 11.6 The multi-agency executive level Dorset Strengthening Services Board was established in summer of 2020 to lead and have oversight of the implementation of the Strengthening Services Plan. The Board is chaired by the Chief Executive of Dorset Council and attended by senior partners from Dorset Council, elected members, Dorset CCG, Dorset Police, health providers, education, schools and early years, Probation, voluntary and community sector representative, parent carer representative and CAF/CASS. The Board supported by many front-line managers and staff, have worked relentlessly together as a partnership to deliver the Strengthening Services Plan. These improvements have been seen by inspectors and acknowledged throughout the published report of the Inspection. The Board is the place-based delivery arm of the Pan-Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership.

12. ILACs Inspection 2021 activity

- 12.1 Inspectors were on site in Dorset Council offices for two weeks to undertake an extensive and thorough review of:
- The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection***
Scope included: early help, identifying and responding to need and appropriate thresholds, making good decisions and providing effective help, management oversight, participation and direct work, identifying and responding to all types of abuse and recognising vulnerability of specific groups.
- The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers***
Scope included: making good decisions for children, participation and direct work with children in care and care leavers, helping and protecting, health, learning and enjoyment, stability and permanence, care leavers and transitions.
- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families***
Scope included: strategic leadership, learning culture, performance management, workforce including workforce development.
- 12.2 Nine representatives from Ofsted took part in the inspection including 6 HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectors) supported by an Ofsted Quality Assurance Lead for the inspection and Ofsted Analytical Officer. An additional HMI Designate attended to shadow the inspection.

- 12.3 Inspector's findings were informed by:
- Attending over 76 meetings and meeting with over 200 people including front line staff, managers, partners, children and young people and parents.
 - Considering over 250 children's circumstances.
 - Reviewing over 365 documents including strategies and plans, policies and procedures, performance data and quality assurance documents.

13. Summary of Report findings

13.1 Ofsted have determined services for children and families in Dorset are of good quality and are continuing to improve, finding that senior leadership has a proven determination to give every child in Dorset a brighter future. They have acknowledged the strong political and corporate commitment to improvement, the pride that staff take in their work and that good work is expected, delivered and celebrated. Inspectors have noted the scaffolding for further improvement is firmly in place.

- 13.2 Dorset Council is now one of:
- Only 17% of Local Authorities (26 out of 151) who have received an outstanding judgement for the impact on leaders on social work practice with children and families.
 - 34% of Local Authorities (51 out of 151) judged to be good or outstanding for overall effectiveness with other judgements good or outstanding.
 - 50% of Local Authorities (76 out of 151) to be judged either good or outstanding for their overall effectiveness.

13.3 Overall effectiveness: summary

Overall effectiveness	Good
<p>Headlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ofsted have judged that 'services for children and families in Dorset are of good quality and continuing to improve' recognising strong leadership with determination to give every child in Dorset a brighter future, and political and corporate commitment to the improvement agenda that supports an environment where good social work can flourish, and children are increasingly better protected. • Ofsted recognised the pace and effectiveness of change in Dorset, particularly in the context of Dorset being a new unitary authority established in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic. • Ofsted have reported they found a stable, permanent workforce and that manageable caseloads are enabling constructive relationships to be built with children and families. 	

- Ofsted have reported staff take pride in their work. Good work is expected, delivered, and celebrated.
- Ambitious projects have already had a positive impact on children including the Harbour that is already safeguarding children on the edge of care and at risk of being exploited.
- Ofsted have reported that children in care and care leavers receive the same high standard of care whether they live in or outside of Dorset, although clearer expectations of workers are needed when care leavers live in emergency accommodation.

13.4 The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: summary

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
<p>Headlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children receive the help that they need at the right time. Families benefit from a broad range of early help services, tailored to their needs in the places where they live. Partnership working is well developed, offering a range of options that build on family’s strengths and which can be provided without delay. • The challenges posed by Covid-19 have been turned into opportunities to develop stronger relationships with partners, schools in particular, to make safeguarding children everybody’s business. • The Children’s Advice and Duty Service model helps families to receive the right support at the right time. When children are, or may be, at risk of significant harm, social workers investigate quickly, with the support of key partners, including the police, when needed. • Since the Ofsted focused visit in October 2019, when inspectors look at arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan, children have received a more consistently good service. • Social workers and managers are now intervening more effectively and decisively in families where children have been living for some time in unsafe and neglectful situations. Assessments are of good quality. The child’s experience is captured in assessments and in the majority of plans, including those for disabled children. • Ofsted have reported that senior managers are acutely aware of some specific areas where practice is not universally good, and strategies to embed good practice are already proving effective. For example, there is a short delay in escalating some cases when risks change, although this does not have an impact on the ongoing work with the child and family. 	

- Ofsted noted that the pre-proceedings process of the Public Law Outline is used effectively. It was noted that some letters to parents are not sufficiently clear, but better ones are using language that parents can easily access.
- Children are seen regularly, on their own and in settings where they feel comfortable. These arrangements continued during the pandemic and staff were inventive in finding ways to see the children they were worried about.
- Managers supervise worker regularly and they reflect carefully on the best way forward for families. Ofsted noted this discussion, including a review of contingencies, is not consistently captured on the child's record, but noted there is no discernible impact of this on the quality of social work practice and senior managers are already addressing this.
- Children who are missing from education and those who are home educated are tracked well. When child protection concerns are identified, they are addressed with appropriate statutory intervention. A strong and joined up approach between schools and children's social care in this instance keeps children safer.
- When children return from going missing or are at risk of exploitation, their personal safety is addressed quickly. Targeted youth workers, police officers, schools and other agencies also work together to map out who else may be at risk putting in place effective measures to disrupt and prevent further exploitation. The multi-agency Harbour programme is noted as being fundamental to the success of these interventions. Children on the edge of care or on the edge of exploitation or criminal activity can remain in their families as a result of tenacious and trusting relationships between them, their workers and local community groups.

13.5 The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: summary

<p>The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers</p>	<p>Good</p>
<p>Headlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children come into care at the right time for them and make good progress while in care. Arrangements for children to return home are managed well, and children only return home if it is safe to do so. • Children in care and care leavers who live outside of Dorset receive the same support and services as those who live within the local authority area. • Ofsted noted that historically the number of children in care has been higher than the places available for them to live in Dorset, however Ofsted noted an increase in the number of older teenagers remaining at home, the 	

commissioning of new provision, the repurposing of existing council premises and brokering arrangements with local providers are beginning to resolve this issue. In the meantime, children are supported to remain in the places where they have strong attachments and that best meet their needs.

- Whenever possible, children in care stay in touch with their family, their brothers and sisters, those important to them and their pets. Children are encouraged to pursue a wider range of hobbies and interests. They have positive and enduring relationships with their independent visitors and receive good advocacy support.
- Permanence arrangements are confirmed with children as soon as possible, so that they know where their long-term home will be. If this is not the plan, they know what their options are and why.
- Most children in care live in foster families. The foster carers are recruited, supported and trained by experienced and aspirational social workers who support them to understand the trauma that children may have faced earlier in their lives.
- The virtual school is highly ambitious for children in care, wherever they live. A particular strength is the impact of more aligned working in the six localities; headteachers, designated teachers and staff at the virtual school work together to secure creative and beneficial outcomes for children.
- Children are helped to understand their life story at a time that is right for them.
- Children in care who are at risk of exploitation are supported well. The information gathered when they return home is put to good use in developing intelligence about risks to both themselves and to other children. Key partners, including local businesses and community leaders, come together in response to the dangers of county lines.
- An increasing number of children's reviews are written directly to children, an important part of helping them to understand key moments in their lives and their story through childhood. Children's voices, either directly or through their advocates, are clearly heard within reviews.
- Disabled children in care receive a consistent and thoughtful service which is responsive to their needs. Communication in all its forms is well understood by the social workers in the specialist teams. Parents are engaged positively in the plans for their children.
- Health assessments are of good quality and children's health needs are well considered. Tenacious efforts by lead officers in health and social care have resulted in a marked increase in the quality and timeliness of health assessments, despite the pressures of Covid-19.
- Children have continued to receive the mental health support that they need without undue delay, which is testament to strong partnerships and advocacy. Care leavers have also benefited from the introduction of a dedicated phonenumber that offers support with isolation and anxiety.
- Adoption is considered carefully and promptly for all children who are unable return home to their birth families who need a permanent

alternative. Senior managers, through regular oversight, assure themselves that children receive an effective service from the regional adoption agency.

- Care leavers are supported well by dedicated personal advisers who work hard to keep in touch with them and offer the support they need, when they need it. This includes those care leavers who are over 21 and, in some cases over 25. The teams working with care leavers are strengthened by working partnerships with the Department for Work and Pensions, housing, adults services and adult mental health.
- Ofsted noted that, young people in more complex situations are prioritised but their written plans are not routinely updated when risks or situations change, however it was acknowledged that work is already happening to address this with senior leaders working alongside care leavers to establish the best way to capture modified plans in a meaningful way.
- It was noted that housing options for care leavers are currently limited with some care leavers housed in temporary accommodation, including a very small number living in bed and breakfast arrangements on an emergency basis. Ofsted have noted that oversight of these arrangements is not sufficiently robust.
- Ofsted noted that senior leaders have responded to the lack of housing options through internal and external commissioning that involves corporate and business partners. Dedicated flats for care leavers, partnership arrangements to increase the number of children's homes and residential beds at the Harbour are all nearing completion.
- The local authority's offer to care leavers is underpinned by what care leavers say they need most, it is explained and accessed effectively. An increasing number of care leavers are at university, in college or have a job. An apprenticeship scheme within Dorset Council, for which care leavers are guaranteed interviews, is a good example of how young people are supported by their corporate parent.

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

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
<p>Headlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders at all levels and elected members recognise and prioritise the needs of children. An ambitious transformation programme is well underway and is having a positive impact on the experiences and progress of children. • Innovative approaches such as the Harbour project, supporting the development of the care leavers' charity and the purchase of affordable 	

accommodation, accompanied by a forensic focus on practice, are improving the lives of children and increasing staff satisfaction.

- In a time of scarce resource and additional demand, children have an increasing range of options as a result of imaginative and cohesive commissioning.
- The blueprint for change and the move to a strengths-based locality model of delivery has reaped significant rewards for children and their families. Senior leaders have made rapid and sustainable progress, despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In some cases, the challenges of the pandemic have created fresh opportunities to build trust and cohesion with partners, and this has increased the pace of change.
- Council leaders had recognised that services needed to change significantly and have given backing, including financial support, to establish the new ways of working.
- Senior leavers know their strengths and weaknesses well. They have a comprehensive understanding of the aspects of the service that still need to improve, and a clear strategy for improvement. The scaffolding for further improvement is firmly in place.
- Peer review, learning from research and input from other good authorities add scrutiny and depth to the extensive performance dashboards and locality meetings that identify emerging themes. Live reporting is used effectively at all managerial levels and enables an agile response if concerns arise. Ofsted noted this intense level of scrutiny is less well evidenced in the care leavers' service where the quality and recording of supervision is not completed to the same high standard. However, Ofsted noted the work to set 'gold standards' for care leavers and actions arising from the associated self-assessment clearly identify the route to improvement.
- The 'triple lock' approach to quality assurance, which adds additional layers to the moderation process to drive improved practice, is adding value. The prime focus of audits is maturing from an emphasis on compliance to a more reflective consideration of quality. Ofsted noted that the involvement of children and families in audits is less strong but learning from the experiences of children through consultation, commissioning, complaints and serious incidents is fully embedded in the development of services. Ofsted noted that participation and advocacy, have a clear focus on strengthening the involvement of all children.
- Ofsted have reported that staff described the new strategic direction and value base as 'transformational' and that they have felt well supported especially during the pandemic. Ofsted have noted that staff have maintained a tireless focus on seeing families, escalating concerns with partner agencies such as housing and health and ensuring that risks are reduced for children.
- Recruitment and retention of staff have been a priority. Social Workers now have manageable caseloads and the workforce is largely permanent.

- When skilled practitioners are identified, they are supported both financially and professionally to be suitably qualified. Work of good quality is recognised and celebrated. Professional development is tailored to core skills and also to Dorset's prime imperative, which is to focus on building resilience in families and in the communities in which they live.

13.7 What needs to improve? Inspectors have identified one area of improvement: *Oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of emergency or temporary accommodation.*

14. Continuous improvement and next steps

14.1 A strong commitment to continuous improvement is embedded in services within children's services and the wider partnership. Learning from this inspection is already being incorporated into a new plan that will support the partnership in its next phase to deliver excellence for children and families in Dorset.

14.2 In accordance with the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (Inspection of Local Authorities) Regulations 2007, the local authority is required to submit an action plan to Ofsted that responds to the findings in the Inspection report within 70 working days of receiving the final inspection report (by 2nd March 2022).

14.3 Learning from the October 2021 ILACs Inspection to be incorporated into the new plan includes:

- ILACS 2021 area for improvement: strengthen oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of emergency or temporary accommodation.
- Ensure that any changes to plans, including plans to temporary accommodation and the arrangements for a long-term plan, are specifically recorded and updated in the young person's Pathway Plan and electronic case record.
- Strengthen quality and recording of supervision within the care leavers' service.
- Continue work to ensure there are sufficient suitable housing options for care leavers in Dorset.
- Ensure that escalation is consistently timely when risks to children change.
- Ensure that letters to parents in pre-proceedings are consistently written in a way that is clear and accessible to them.
- Continue work to strengthen recording of reflective supervision on children's records.
- Continue work to strengthen the involvement of children and families in audits.

The plan will also include areas already identified by the partnership that will build upon the strong foundations put in place. These include:

- Implementation of enhanced reporting of Early Help.
- Continued joint work regarding Domestic Abuse.
- Continued work to ensure robust responses to sexual abuse including on-line abuse.
- Work in response to national and local strategy on violence against women and girls.
- Pathways of support and early support for children and young people at risk of anti-social behaviour.
- Implementation of substance misuse and mental health toolkits.
- Continue to build on Children's Advice and Duty and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub arrangements.
- Continued focused work on strengthening emotional wellbeing and mental health service pathways, services and responses for children and young people.
- Implementation of plans for 0 to settled adulthood.
- Further enhancing support and information for care leavers.
- Ensure the voice of children and young people is fully embedded at the heart of everything we do.
- Continuing to build on the offer of support for Dorset Council Foster Carers.
- Implementation of additional local placements for children in care.
- Continued relentless focus across the partnership in delivering excellence in practice across all services.

14.4 Progress of the new plan will continue to be monitored through the robust and embedded methods in place both within children's services and the partnership. These include leadership and oversight of the plan by the partnership's Strengthening Services Board, Quality Assurance and Performance Management Frameworks and by seeking continual feedback from children, young people and families.

14.5 Further reporting to Elected Members will continue through the Council's senior leadership performance dashboard. The annual Self-Evaluation of children's services will be prepared early 2022 and will also be reported to Elected Members.

Recommendation:

Cabinet is asked to note and consider Ofsted's published report of the recent Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services in Dorset and the next steps.

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.