

Inspection of Dorset local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 27 September to 8 October 2021

Lead inspector: Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
|--|--------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Outstanding |
| 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 |

Services for children and families in Dorset are of good quality and are continuing to improve. The senior leadership team is an impressive and successful force for change, with a proven determination to give every child in Dorset a brighter future. Strong political and corporate commitment to the improvement agenda supports an environment where good social work can flourish, and children are increasingly better protected.

The pace and effectiveness of change in the context of a local government reorganisation in 2019, resulting in a boundary change and the creation of Dorset unitary authority, and the COVID-19 pandemic, are particularly impressive. Senior leaders have taken the challenges presented by the pandemic as an opportunity to engage partners more firmly in the wider safeguarding agenda and in the vision of making Dorset the best place it can be for children to thrive. A stable, permanent workforce and manageable caseloads enable constructive relationships to be built with children and families. Staff take pride in their work. Good work is expected, delivered and celebrated. Several ambitious projects, including some still at an early stage, have already had a positive impact on children. The targeted youth work offer from the Harbour is already safeguarding children who are on the edge of care and at risk of being exploited. 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.

What needs to improve?

- Oversight of arrangements when care leavers move in and out of emergency or temporary accommodation.

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

1. 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 and 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 the COVID-19 pandemic have been turned into opportunities to develop stronger relationships with partners, schools in particular, to make safeguarding children everybody's business.
2. The ChAD (children's advice and duty service) model helps families to receive the right support at the right time by clarifying the concerns with referrers and activating local solutions whenever possible. The 'front door' provides a calm, well-organised service, where timely and appropriate decisions are made about how to protect and support children most effectively. Parental consent is obtained if appropriate, and families are not subjected to statutory intervention unnecessarily. However, 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.
3. Since the Ofsted focused visit in October 2019, when inspectors looked at arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan, children have received a more consistently good service. The effective application of thresholds at key decision-making points is underpinned by the regular professional discussions held by advanced practitioners and their managers. In parallel, a well-structured suite of multi-agency meetings prioritises those children who are most at risk from domestic abuse and exploitation in all its forms. As a result, shared intelligence is used well to identify and disrupt networks of abusers when children are missing from home or otherwise vulnerable.
4. Child protection concerns are investigated appropriately. In their investigations and ongoing work with families, social workers make good use of research, specialists and each other to identify childhood trauma and how best to support victims of abuse. Senior managers are currently looking carefully at section 47 enquiries that do not result in a child protection plan, to ensure that children and families are not subject to unnecessary intervention.
5. 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. They escalate concerns appropriately and with confidence, enabling children to be better protected.

6. Assessments are of good quality. Parenting assessments are strong, analytical and thorough. They capture the impact of parenting from a child's point of view. They also include consideration of absent parents, whether father or mother. Importantly, restorative work starts during the assessment, enabling change to take place at an early stage. When children have no speech, social workers use triangulated observation to get a better understanding of how they communicate their feelings. The child's experience is captured in assessments and in the majority of plans, including those for disabled children. Advocates are available for children subject to a child protection plan; their independence adds authenticity to reviews when children choose not to attend in person.
7. 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. Similarly, quality assurance reviewing officers (QAROs) are beginning to ensure that social work reports for child protection conferences are written to children in the first person, to help them to understand why social workers are involved, although this practice is not yet consistent.
8. The pre-proceedings process of the Public Law Outline is used effectively to focus clearly on and identify what needs to change to make children safer. As a result, many children remain with their families. Some letters to parents are not sufficiently clear, but the better ones use language that parents can easily understand. Ultimately, many families are diverted out of pre-proceedings and can see where they have made progress.
9. 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 that they were worried about; this strengthened the relationships that they have with them. This creativity and care are illustrated by schemes such as giving hampers to young carers and their families at Christmas, providing them with food for several days to reduce pressure on the families and to lessen the risk of exposure to COVID-19.
10. Managers supervise workers regularly and they reflect carefully on the best way forward for families. This discussion, including a review of contingencies, is not consistently captured on the child's record, but there is no discernible impact of this on the quality of social work practice. Senior managers are already considering the best way to capture more reflective conversations.
11. 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. Dorset saw an increase in children being electively home educated in the context of the pandemic. However, the numbers of children being electively home educated have now

returned to pre-pandemic levels. A strong and joined-up approach between schools and children's social care in this instance keeps children safer.

12. 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. For example, young people in Weymouth who were being targeted by unsafe adults made good use of the relationships they have with outreach workers to help to keep themselves safe. The Harbour programme, based on North Yorkshire's 'No wrong door' model, working with children on the edge of care, is 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.

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

13. 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 if it is safe to do so. Submissions to the family court are thorough, and include specialist assessments when necessary and well-considered recommendations. Preparedness for court and progression through the various stages are tracked effectively and supported by an experienced legal team.
14. 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. Other local authorities are notified promptly that a child is moving to their area, and social workers ensure that services are in place to meet the child's needs before they move. Historically, the number of children in care has been higher than the places available for them to live in Dorset. 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, including making use of 'staying put' arrangements as they become more independent.
15. Whenever possible, children in care stay in touch with their family, their brothers and sisters, those who are important to them and their pets. Family arrangements, which are often complex, are handled sensitively. Children are encouraged to pursue a wide range of hobbies and interests, from acting to academia, forest school to football. They have positive and enduring relationships with their independent visitors and receive good advocacy support.

16. 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 the options are and why. Foster to adopt arrangements are commonplace, as well as two or three options being explored in parallel that take account of each child in a family and where they feel most safe and secure.
17. 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. Through the challenges of several lockdowns, foster carers have been supported well to build and maintain relationships with children.
18. The virtual school is highly ambitious for children in care, wherever they live. They have an accurate analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of educational provision for children in care and care leavers. 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. At times, this has included working with school governors to reverse permanent exclusions. The pupil premium, linked to personal education plans, is used creatively. In the context of COVID-19, this support has extended to extra-curricular activities that benefit children's mental health and help to create the right environment for learning.
19. Children are helped to understand their life story at a time that is right for them. On several occasions, sensitive work to address past trauma has enabled children to settle in a permanent home after several moves, as they more fully understand what has happened to them. Specialist practitioners support colleagues to complete this work to a good standard. Children's unique identity, be it their culture, sexuality or race, is valued and explored with curiosity and care.
20. As with children who go missing from home, 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. Given the transient tourist population, concerns about children arriving from other areas are addressed with the same level of urgency.
21. 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. Independent reviewing officers, known as QAROs in Dorset, have regular oversight of children's lives and the plans for their future. Children's voices, either directly or through their advocates, are clearly heard within reviews.

22. 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, with clear efforts to synchronise augmented communication techniques between home and school. Parents are engaged positively in the plans for their children, whether periods of care are for short breaks or on a longer-term basis.
23. Health assessments are of a 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. The impact on children's mental health in the same context is a concerning issue in Dorset as much as everywhere else. 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 phoneline that offers support with isolation and anxiety.
24. Adoption is considered carefully and promptly for all children who are unable to return home to their birth families and who need a permanent alternative. Senior managers, through regular oversight, assure themselves that children receive an effective service from the regional adoption agency. This includes post-adoption support that is tailored to the history of the children and their clearly identified support needs.
25. Care leavers are supported well by dedicated personal advisers who work hard to keep in touch with them and offer the support that they need, when they need it. This includes those care leavers who are over 21 and, in some cases, over 25. The move to introduce personal advisers at 16 has been well received and is allowing these relationships to develop sooner. As a result, pathway plans are increasingly constructed alongside young people. The teams working with care leavers are strengthened by working partnerships with the Department for Work and Pensions, housing, adult services and adult mental health. Young people in more complex situations, including when they are in custody, dependent on drugs and alcohol or vulnerable to exploitation, are prioritised, but their written plans are not routinely updated when risks or situations change. Senior leaders are working alongside care leavers to establish the best way to capture modified plans in a meaningful way.
26. Housing options for care leavers are limited. Some care leavers are housed in temporary accommodation, including a very small number living in bed and breakfast arrangements on an emergency basis. Oversight of these arrangements is not sufficiently robust, particularly in terms of visiting arrangements, supporting young people with everyday needs and seeking alternative housing.
27. 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.

28. The local authority's offer to care leavers is underpinned by what care leavers say they need the most. The offer 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 have guaranteed interviews, is a good example of how young people are supported by their corporate parent. Although in its infancy, it has the potential to add new options for young people to pursue their careers.

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

29. 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. Corporate decision-making, which takes account of the views of key partners and community leaders, is informed by an in-depth knowledge of the needs of the local population. 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.
30. 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.
31. Senior leaders 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. For example, the implementation of the domestic abuse toolkit, learning from a full review of sexual abuse in Dorset, and an increased emphasis on achieving permanence, are all starting to take effect. The scaffolding for further improvement is firmly in place.
32. Peer review, learning from research and input from other good authorities add scrutiny and depth to the extensive suite of 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. This intense 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, the local authority was fully involved in the government initiative to set 'gold standards' for care leavers, and actions arising from the associated self-assessment clearly identify the route to improvement.

33. 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. 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. Participation and advocacy services have been recommissioned relatively recently, with a clear focus on strengthening the involvement of all children, including those placed out of county or with additional learning needs. Learning reviews are intelligently targeted and timely, with practitioners and partners included in achieving consequent improvements.
34. Staff describe the new strategic direction and value base as 'transformational'. They have felt well supported, especially during the challenges of the pandemic. They 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. The recruitment and retention of staff have been a priority. Social workers now have manageable caseloads and the workforce is largely permanent, helped by the recruitment of experienced practitioners from overseas. Maintaining stability through a large-scale reorganisation has been achieved with minimal disruption due to clear, open and consistent messages from the leadership team.
35. When skilled practitioners are identified, they are supported both financially and professionally to become 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. Opportunities to learn from practice reviews, research and successful approaches in other local authorities are clearly identified and acted upon.

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