

# Hampshire County Council

## Inspection of local authority children's services

**Inspection dates: 29 April 2019 to 3 May 2019**

**Lead inspector: Donna Marriott  
Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

Children's services in Hampshire are outstanding. Since the last full inspection in 2014, the director and his leadership team have resolutely focused on continuing to improve the help, care and protection provided to children. Social workers are highly skilled at building meaningful relationships with children, engaging them in their assessments and plans. Children in care benefit from high-quality support, which is making a real difference to their outcomes. Management oversight of practice is clear and considered, ensuring that children's plans progress at pace. Children's lives consistently improve as a result of the help they receive.

Strong political and corporate support and well-targeted financial investment have helped the leadership team to implement an ambitious transformation programme. This has created the capacity, training and infrastructure to enable social workers to engage more purposefully with children and their families. Leaders across all levels of the council have an accurate and extensive understanding of the quality of frontline practice. Effective quality assurance and performance systems support leaders to maintain strong oversight of practice. The outward-facing senior leadership team firmly embraces innovation, ensuring a focus on continuous

improvement, while supporting other local authorities through its engagement in sector-led improvement.

## **What needs to improve**

- The proportion of children who are offered, and take up, a return home interview when they have been missing from home or care.
- The Corporate Parenting Board's rigour in holding partners, including health providers and district councils, to account to ensure that they prioritise services for children and young people more effectively.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection is outstanding**

1. Children in need of help or protection benefit from high-quality services that improve their lives, whatever the level of their need. Children and families benefit from effective early help services. Strong partnership engagement and co-located early help hubs ensure effective coordination, enabling families to access timely, well-targeted help when their needs are first identified.
2. Experienced, skilled practitioners and managers, supported by highly effective systems, ensure a consistently swift and efficient response when children are referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Parental consent is routinely sought. Children's support workers provide comprehensive historical information to inform decisions, including clear analysis regarding risks and strengths. Well-understood thresholds are consistently and confidently applied by managers, leading to appropriate decisions about next steps. Management oversight is strongly evidenced, with clear recording of the rationale for threshold decisions.
3. Strong partnership working in the MASH supports a timely and carefully considered response to domestic abuse notifications. The recent introduction of daily high-risk meetings enhances information-sharing, ensuring prompt access to support services for children and victims. The police practice of referring all notifications involving children to the MASH results in a high volume of work, much of which does not meet the threshold for children's social care. The police and the local authority have recognised that this is a challenge, and work is already underway to resolve it.
4. When children need protection, swift, proportionate and authoritative action is taken during and outside of office hours. Strategy discussions in the MASH focus on the threshold decision and lead to comprehensive information-sharing. The rationale for decisions, outline interim plan and contingency arrangements are not routinely recorded at this stage; these actions are progressed by the area teams, which conduct a further strategy discussion with the involved

agencies. This process is not sufficiently streamlined, and has the potential to create unnecessary duplication. Strategy discussions lead to the right action, and children are effectively safeguarded through well-thought-out, high-quality child protection investigations.

5. Social workers are highly skilled at building and sustaining enduring relationships with children. This is a considerable strength in Hampshire. Social workers undertake creative, tailored, direct work with children to help them to understand their situation. Social workers eloquently reflect the child's experiences in case recording, writing to them personally, which provides a powerful sense of the child, supporting children's understanding of why decisions are made. This is strengthened further by well-written, thoughtful, child-centred assessments, which bring children's experiences to life and provide a palpable sense of their lives. Assessments are regularly updated, make good use of children's histories and capture their views. Comprehensive risk analysis is used well to inform subsequent plans.
6. Staff are skilled at using 'strengths-based' approaches and empowering children and families to take control of their plans. This is having a particularly positive and tangible impact on children's outcomes. For example, some disabled children are benefiting from innovative approaches. This includes the creative use of technology that is focused on their individual needs, drawing on family strengths and building resilience.
7. Child in need and child protection plans have a strong focus on children's needs. They are clear about what needs to happen, and about who needs to make it happen; most have time-bound actions. Children with more complex needs benefit from tailored and highly effective support from intensive support workers. The 'Hampshire Approach', permeates the work with children and families, building confidence and resilience and leading to positive outcomes for children. A new format for reviews ensures that the progress of children's plans is easily understood.
8. Rigorous management oversight, including the chairing of child in need meetings by managers, is central to the progression of children's plans. Management oversight is consistently evident at a multitude of sign-off points, with the rationale for decisions written to the child to support an understanding of why decisions are made. Managers routinely review the records of social workers' visits to children. This supports their knowledge and oversight of the frequency, quality and impact of the support provided. Social workers report that supervision is helpful in aiding reflection and analysis, but this is not well evidenced in the recording of these conversations.
9. Senior managers have taken authoritative action to strengthen pre-proceedings work since the focused visit in 2018. This has led to significantly improved management oversight and more consistent practice across the county. High-quality, comprehensive legal strategy meetings effectively consider threshold

decisions and provide clear direction regarding next steps. Most letters to parents are written in clear and accessible language. The progression of plans is regularly reviewed.

10. When children go missing from home or care, managers and social workers respond quickly and effectively to ensure that they are not exposed to potential harm. High-risk multi-agency strategy meetings, overseen by senior managers, are highly effective in progressing children's plans. Not all children who go missing are offered return home interviews, and when they take place they are not always well recorded. This means that, potentially, patterns relating to episodes of going missing may not be fully understood, although inspectors found good evidence of information about children's experiences while they are missing being shared between professionals in other ways. The local authority recognises that the quality of safeguarding intelligence would be improved further through a more consistent return home interview offer and greater take-up of these important conversations with children after each episode of going missing. The local authority had recognised this prior to the inspection and had acted to restructure the return home interview service.
11. Adolescent contextual safeguarding is understood well within the Hampshire context. The response of the strategic and operational partnerships to vulnerable young people at risk of exploitation is highly effective. The multi-disciplinary 'Willow' team is a valuable service, offering a wide range of interventions that effectively reduce risk and improve outcomes for children. The most vulnerable young people benefit from plans that are overseen via highly effective high-risk strategy meetings. Targeted, creative approaches are employed to reach young people in known hotspots. When potential vulnerabilities such as the risk of trafficking or radicalisation are identified, prompt action is taken, and risk is reduced.
12. When young people aged 16 and 17 are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, their needs are quickly assessed. Every effort is made to support young people to remain with their families. The local authority has designed a leaflet to explain to young people their rights and entitlements when they are in housing need. However, it is not always clearly recorded whether young people have been provided with all the information they need to inform their decision-making about whether they wish to come into care.
13. The local authority has raised the profile of its work in relation to elective home education, after a sharp increase in numbers over the past few years. Consequently, increased liaison with families has helped to support notable numbers of pupils returning to a school, where this is agreed to be in their best interests. The local authority offers proportionate support to those pupils and families identified as potentially most vulnerable, to promote their welfare.
14. Clear processes are in place to oversee children who are identified as missing from education. There are some inconsistencies in record keeping, but

successful liaison between the teams who oversee these children and children's services ensures that appropriately swift action is taken when concerns arise, such as by prompting home visits. The local authority keeps a careful check on all children not in receipt of full-time school education, liaising regularly with schools to make sure that children are safe and accounted for.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is outstanding**

15. Tenacious and creative work is undertaken to support children to safely remain in the care of their families wherever possible. Intensive support workers demonstrate skill through their sensitive, relationship-based work with families. Thorough, well-evidenced rehabilitation assessments and plans provide a sound basis from which to support children to successfully return home when this is in their best long-term interests. Appropriate and well-balanced decisions concerning children who do come into care are informed by thoughtful and rigorous management oversight.
16. Social workers build consistent and important relationships with children in care. They undertake insightful direct work that is carefully tailored to children's individual needs. Social workers' verbal accounts and written records of this work powerfully convey a strong picture of children's lived experiences, and the views of their birth families, supported by ongoing life-story work to help children understand their earlier lives. Social workers record their work with children diligently and sensitively, using a personalised and straightforward style of writing that demonstrates warmth and concern.
17. Social workers regularly consider and re-assess children's changing needs. Care plans are thorough, highlighting new and emerging needs, and clearly explain how they will be addressed. Social workers support children to participate in developing their care plans, capturing this on the newly developed care plan template, 'My Life, My Future'. These child-centred plans are written to the child and include scaling questions and emojis to help children to express their opinions about issues that are important to them. Participation is evident through their subsequent review process, where children are supported to chair their own reviews where possible. Children's reviews are firmly focused on children's progress and well-being. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are strong advocates for children, challenging any shortfalls in care plan actions and checking the progress of children in between their statutory reviews.
18. The well-regarded virtual school is ambitious for children in care, proactively supporting children to do as well as they can at school. Personal education plans, with an improved completion rate and greater quality, provide a rigorous tool for monitoring children's progress in education, particularly in understanding the reasons underlying lower attainment. Social workers work collaboratively with the virtual school to support the promotion of children's

educational achievement. The recent establishment of a virtual college is beginning to improve the quality of provision for young people aged 16 to 18 years, with emerging evidence of its positive impact on their destinations.

19. Social workers, managers and carers ensure a strong focus on children's health and emotional well-being. Not all initial and review health assessments are timely, and this is due to pressures in capacity in health provision. However, local authority leaders are working determinedly with colleagues in the responsible NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups to address the issues causing delays and new arrangements have recently come into place. Social workers and carers routinely ensure that children's health needs are understood, prioritised and followed up. Social workers make good use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires to inform planning for children to understand children's emotional needs and to inform plans to meet these.
20. Children's participation is active, influential and widespread. Regular surveys, activity days, digital feedback initiatives, participation conferences and the recruitment of a growing number of care ambassadors are some of the wide range of methods and approaches that are routinely used to understand how children experience their lives in care. The local authority is innovative about how it encourages participation, for example through a theatre project which promotes children's well-being and mental health through the creative arts. Lead participation champions in each district organise an array of events and forums each month through which children's views are sought, for example about the qualities of a good social worker.
21. Children live with carers who meet their needs well and go to great lengths to improve their outcomes. Residential care is considered where it is appropriate for older children, including the use of the highly rated children's homes managed by the local authority. Comprehensive and highly evaluative assessments of connected carers and special guardians result in appropriate and lasting arrangements for children, underpinned by strong support plans. Carers receive determined support when they are struggling with children's behaviours and this helps them overcome challenging periods and to build resilience.
22. The local authority employs a rigorous approach to assessing the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children when they first arrive in Hampshire. Every effort is made to match these children with carers who meet children's cultural needs and to ensure that they have access to a wide range of support. This group of young people is very well supported, and many achieve positive outcomes in the care of the local authority.
23. Senior leaders have been proactive in seeking to respond to the challenges in finding well-matched placements for some older children with complex needs, but some difficulties remain. On occasions, this can lead to children being matched with carers based on availability, rather than need. This adversely

impacts on short-term placement stability. Leaders and managers are acutely aware of the importance of promoting stability for children. They have been proactive in the steps they have taken to strengthen placement stability, undertaking analysis to understand the reasons why some children experience placement moves. The local authority has invested in placement stability workers in each fostering team to support carers. Although it is too early to evidence widespread impact, some children are already benefiting from this arrangement.

24. Assessments of prospective foster carers and the training and support subsequently provided are of a high standard. Children are carefully matched with carers, and the support offered by their supervising social workers helps them to remain resilient and child-focused during challenging times.
25. As soon as children enter care, permanence is actively considered through early planning for a range of possible outcomes. Managers and IROs closely track and challenge permanence plans where decisions take longer, so that periods of uncertainty for children are avoided.
26. Children with a plan for adoption benefit from a high-quality service from experienced and skilled social workers and managers. This already strong service has improved further since the last inspection. An increasing number of prospective adopters have been recruited over the last year, providing a sufficiently wide and diverse pool of families for children. Assessments of potential adopters are sensitive, detailed and comprehensive. Children's needs are carefully and holistically considered in linking and matching, and creative solutions are explored to enable brothers and sisters to grow up together.
27. Later-life letters to children and life-story work for adopted children are of a consistently high standard. These important records provide adopters with a rich and highly informed understanding of children's backgrounds and needs to enable them to help children to form lasting attachments, and they are likely to be treasured by children when they are old enough to understand them. The support and training provided to adoptive families, from their initial application to post approval, is highly valued, strengthening the resilience of adopters during difficult periods so that they can continue to provide stable and loving care to their children.
28. Care leavers receive dedicated and effective support from their personal advisers (PAs), who know them very well and see them regularly. Pathway plans are dynamic documents featuring the active engagement of young people. They clearly set out credible and achievable actions to support young people during their gradual transition towards independence.
29. Nearly all care leavers live in accommodation that is suitable to their needs and level of independence. 'Staying put' arrangements with foster carers are actively promoted, including for young people who are placed with carers in

independent fostering agencies. These arrangements provide appropriate and enabling independence pathways. A current retendering exercise is intended to further improve the existing range and sufficiency of accommodation options for young people. Leaders are working constructively with local district councils to ensure that the exemption from council tax for care leavers offered by some districts is applied by all of them.

30. Care leavers are supported well by their PAs to recognise and address their physical and emotional health needs. A helpful 'flagging' system lets local GPs know whether a young person is a care leaver. This allows young people to have some control about whether they choose to discuss their health backgrounds. Work to develop a consistent format for sharing health histories with care leavers has not been progressed because young people were ambivalent about how helpful this would be for them. During the inspection, senior leaders were clear that they plan to revisit this with care leavers and intend to progress this work with pace.
31. Through conscientious and diligent work by their PAs, care leavers are provided with practical and emotional support to make the transition to independence. Care leavers are strongly supported by their PAs to be ambitious in pursuing suitable education, employment or training opportunities. The increasing impact of the virtual college has generated a sharper focus on early post-16 transition work, to guide young people into clear and purposeful pathways that are suitable to their individual needs. This has resulted in a marked improvement in the proportion of care leavers who are in employment, education and training.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is outstanding**

32. Senior and political leaders in Hampshire are ambitious, purposeful and influential. Together, and consistently over time, they have presented a coherent and shared vision to deliver high-quality services for children. They have a strong record of continuous improvement. Hampshire Children's Services demonstrates a strong commitment to continual learning, constantly seeking to develop and enhance the capabilities and capacity of the workforce. Corporate and political leaders demonstrate a solid commitment to children's services. They are confident in the leadership team's vision for future-proofing the service and have committed substantial financial investment to make that vision a reality.
33. Leaders have worked purposefully to improve services for children in Hampshire since they were judged to be good, and outstanding in adoption and leadership, in 2014. A highly successful large-scale transformation programme has included the creation of additional social work posts and an innovative pathway of support for newly qualified social workers. The implementation of children's assessment and safeguarding teams (CAST) and

specialist multi-disciplinary teams supports an increasingly holistic approach to children's needs, reducing transfer points and promoting continuity of social work relationships with children and families.

34. The appointment of personal assistants to support social workers, combined with improved technology and the implementation of the strengths-based social work model, the 'Hampshire Approach', have equipped social workers with the tools, skills and time to work directly with children and families. Consequently, children's needs are better understood, intervention is purposeful, and children and families are being helped to become more resilient.
35. Effective governance and strong partnership arrangements promote a joined-up approach to meeting children's needs. Children's needs and views are kept at the centre of strategic planning and decision-making. Strong political and corporate support in children's services is evident. In addition to committing significant investment in the service transformation, political leaders have ensured substantial investment to build seven new children's homes to support children to live closer to home. Children have been extensively involved in the design of these homes, and their views have been central to planning. For example, children wanted the home to have fireplaces so that it would feel homelier, and a fireplace was included in the design of the home.
36. The corporate parenting board effectively seeks to build a well-informed understanding of the experiences, concerns and achievements of children in care. The board is energetic in taking steps to ensure that all children receive good services. The board's ongoing engagement with children is an essential, primary focus of its work and is gained through a wide variety of sources, including the involvement of an expanding number of children in care, engaged as care ambassadors.
37. The board has not extended its membership to include partner agencies due to concerns about the impact this might have on the engagement of children in care and care leavers. While the board effectively scrutinises all the important areas of services for children in care, it does not have a systematic way of ensuring consistent collaboration with key partners, such as health services, district councils or foster carers. This dilutes its ability to ensure a joined-up response to areas for development, such as ensuring timely health assessments and delivering a more consistent approach to council tax exemption for care leavers.
38. Comprehensive performance and quality assurance systems support leaders and managers to maintain strong oversight of practice. Managers and leaders at all levels scrutinise performance information, learning and audit activity. This is supported by a programme of annual internal peer reviews of every district, involving frontline staff in assessing the effectiveness of services. A comprehensive programme of practice observations and thematic audits helps

to triangulate performance information to provide greater insight into the quality of frontline practice. Leaders are continually working to improve the quality of audit activity, having designed a more qualitative tool to support this work, and are engaging managers, practitioners and service users in the audit programme. Further work is needed with those staff who undertake this work to improve the quality of audits completed. This is currently being addressed through a large-scale training programme for all frontline managers.

39. The DCS has created a culture of distributed leadership which ensures that staff at every level share accountability for tackling the challenges that the service faces and celebrate together the successes that are achieved. This in turn has created a confident, strong leadership team, with an unwavering focus on improvement and a workforce that has faith in leaders and managers to deliver.
40. Social workers are positive about working in Hampshire. They value the innovative approach to technology and flexible working, which helps them to juggle the demands of work and home and enables them to go 'over and above' in supporting the children and families. Staff find managers supportive, and value the quality of supervision they receive. Management oversight is rigorous and effective, consistently ensuring that children's plans are progressed at the right pace. Supervision is regular, and although social workers report that it is helpful in promoting reflection and analysis, this is not always well evidenced in recording of these discussions.
41. Aspirational senior leaders promote a culture of learning and continual professional development. They recognise that their creativity and strong leadership are leading to improvement, but they are not complacent. They continually strive to deliver better services for the children they help, protect and care for. They firmly embrace innovation, actively seeking out external views and perspectives to support continuous improvement.
42. Hampshire is a Department for Education 'Partner in Practice', providing sector-led improvement through peer support to authorities who need to improve. The local authority has invested extensively in this work. Leaders recognise the benefits that come from being an improvement partner, not only in creating income, but also in the learning that is gained from other local authorities and from keeping its own staff stimulated and stretched.
43. Senior leaders recognise that their greatest asset is their staff. They have invested heavily in the children's workforce, fundamentally changing their approach to recruitment and retention through an ambitious workforce development plan. This plan is built on a strong commitment to create capacity and stability within the service in 'growing our own social workers' through the introduction of the graduate entry trainee scheme. During 2018, 90 newly qualified social workers were recruited to this scheme, building stability and resilience across the service.

44. A new partnership arrangement with another local authority to provide an in-house social work agency provides increased reach and autonomy. The increase in the staffing establishment is delivering results, with reducing caseloads and high morale among the workforce. Further caseload reductions are projected as newly qualified staff progress through their first year and become more experienced.



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