

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Michael Marks
Executive Director, Children and Public Health
Southend-on-Sea City Council
Civic Centre
Victoria Avenue
Southend on Sea SS2 6ER

Dear Michael,

Focused visit to Southend-On-Sea children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Southend-On-Sea children's services on 23 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Naintara Khosla and Tracey Scott.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Leaders in Southend are firmly centred on delivering strengthened social work practice and creating the culture and environment for effective child-focused services. This has led to some significant improvements in the areas considered by this visit. A thorough, comprehensive self-assessment provides accurate information on service performance and informs priorities for development.

Leaders have spent time creating an environment for social workers to build strong and trusting relationships with children. Supervision and management oversight are evident on children's records, but quality and regularity are not yet sufficiently consistent. The views of partner agencies are routinely integrated in assessments, strategy meetings and plans to protect children. However, for some children living in neglectful and/or with domestic abuse, help is not provided consistently; they remain living in circumstances without sustained progress being made. For a few social workers, their high workloads impact on their ability to engage sufficiently with children and impedes the progression of plans.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Specificity and timeliness of child in need and child protection plans.
- The response to children who are living with chronic neglect and/or domestic abuse.
- Clarity about the legal status, assessment and support provided to those children placed with family and friends due to safeguarding concerns.

Main findings

Corporate and political leaders have shown their commitment to the improvement journey and this whole-council approach emphasises the priority given to children's social work services. The director of children's services is engaging with independent improvement partners, who assist in providing robust external scrutiny. While progress is evident, inspectors identified some areas of practice which require further strengthening.

Most children are seen regularly at a frequency proportionate to presenting need and are safer because of the help they receive. Social workers know their children well and most children develop strong and trusting relationships with their social workers. For some children, direct work is creative and intuitive. This assists in understanding children's views and informs social workers' understanding of children's day-to-day lives. This contributes to social workers' assessment of risk and allows appropriate safety plans to be developed.

Children's records are variable in their quality, with stronger examples capturing observations, interactions, direct work, reflections and hypotheses. Some records were too focused on adult self-reporting rather than an objective social work evaluation.

Most assessments capture the child's voice, their experiences and family histories. Information is shared by and with the wider professional network, which supports accurate risk assessment. Management oversight is routinely in place and effective. Stronger practice places children at the heart of the assessment, is curious and provides strong evidence of considering the child's experiences and their views; analysis considers risks and potential hypotheses effectively. For a small number of children, gaps in assessment information are evident and assessments are not always updated when children's circumstances change. Leaders have focused on the integration of fathers into social work assessments and interventions. This is increasingly evident and having a positive impact for some children, with fathers supported in their caring roles.

The progression of multi-agency child in need plans are supported through regular reviews, and for many children their circumstances improve. Parents are supported to attend and participate. Their voices are heard. The vast majority of children's needs are appropriately identified. For some children, plans do not contain specific,

time-bound actions and therefore plans are not always progressed within appropriate timescales.

Comprehensive multi-agency information-sharing takes place at the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), to develop effective initial safety planning. Information provided from MARAC is regularly shared with the child's social worker and available on the child's record. However, core groups and plans for children are not informed by MARAC information; this does not assist in providing a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences.

Multi-agency strategy meetings are used effectively to share information to inform risk assessments, although next steps are not always sufficiently detailed, or time-bound. Strengthened management oversight is supporting effective pre-birth planning and protection for unborn children.

Some children experience chronic neglect and exposure to domestic violence for too long without positive, sustained change, despite prolonged and repeated social work involvement. The preferred model of practice to understand and work with children where neglect is a feature is not consistently used.

Practitioners are not assisted with a framework for intervention that supports measurable change in parenting capacity or the sustainability of any changes. When children are subject to child protection planning, multi-agency core groups are held regularly and are effective in supporting the progression of most children's plans. For a small number of children, plans end too early. For some children, child protection conference minutes do not include the full analysis of risks and therefore safety planning is not sufficiently comprehensive. For a small number of children who are unable to live safely with their birth parents and a period of alternative care is provided by family and friends, there is a lack of clarity and understanding about the legal status, assessment and support provided to those arrangements.

Since the last inspection, leaders' response to children in pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline has been strengthened. Children are regularly reviewed at panel and there is greater management oversight; however, it is not yet consistently effective and prompt for all children. Senior leaders recognise the need to improve letters before proceedings to ensure that they are jargon-free, avoid the use of professional language and are easily accessible to parents.

Social workers who were spoken to during this visit were positive about working for Southend and reported feeling safe and 'belonging'. Social workers reported that management is thoughtful, considers successes and celebrates good practice. Social workers feel supported by the team managers, the senior leadership team are visible and social workers can discuss issues affecting their work with children.

Where there is a need for support with personal issues, this is provided. For a small number of social workers, high workloads impact on their ability to undertake all the work necessary to build and sustain relationships with children.

The leadership team promotes a Southend recruitment and retention social work employment offer; this is beginning to show impact, with the workforce slowly becoming more stable. In a national environment which is challenging for recruitment, recruitment and retention of staff is an area of relentless focus for leaders. The workforce benefits from insightful strategic planning to recruit newly qualified social workers over the service establishment; they are given every opportunity to settle in Southend and gain experience so that they do not want to leave.

The bespoke individual approach to social work learning and development needs is appreciated by staff and this positively impacts on staff morale, development and retention. Children's records reflect the restorative practice model and records are compassionate and thoughtful.

Supervision regularity is improving, although not fully realised for all social workers, and the quality is variable. In better records, supervision provides reflection, analysis and appropriate case direction. Supervision does not always provide time-bound actions. Management oversight helps clarify decision-making for children and it is mostly consistent.

A clearly structured and comprehensive quality assurance framework is in place, and used effectively to inform the continuous professional development offer. Quality assurance provides rich information, along with an audit tool which provides opportunities to develop social work practice. Where it works well, collaboration takes place with the auditor and social work practitioner, and reflective social work practice is supported. The views of children and young people are integrated into the quality assurance framework.

Social workers experience an open, supportive management team and work in an environment where social work practice is developing and beginning to flourish. Strengthening confidence, knowledge and expertise in complex areas of social work, for example family and friends care, remain areas for the local authority to focus on.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Naintara Khosla
His Majesty's Inspector