

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

**T** 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

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Chris Sivers  
Executive Director for People  
South Gloucestershire Council  
Council Offices  
Badminton Road  
Yate  
BS37 5AF

Dear Ms Sivers

### **Focused visit to South Gloucestershire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to South Gloucestershire children's services on 14 and 15 September 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sarah Canto and Tom Anthony.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

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

### **Headline findings**

Most children in care are living in homes that meet their needs. However, children are not receiving a consistently good service. Senior leaders know this and are taking appropriate action to address practice weaknesses. Leaders, with strong corporate and political support, have made a commitment to improve children's outcomes and to achieve the council's top priority of the 'best start in life'. Overall, significant investment has paved the way for important improvements in both leadership and staffing capacity. Much of this is new and, consequently, positive impact for children is inevitably limited at this early stage. However, social workers spoken to are positive about working for South Gloucestershire children's services.

The local authority has responded positively to the unexpected arrival of relatively high numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children by ensuring that this vulnerable group are looked after and cared for appropriately.

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

- The stability of the workforce.
- Management oversight, including by independent reviewing officers (IROs), of plans and arrangements for children.
- How quickly decisions to secure permanent homes for children are made and implemented.
- The frequency and quality of supervision to drive children's progress.
- How consistently children's case records are kept up to date and complete.

## Main findings

While most children are living in homes that meet their needs, a small number of highly vulnerable children live in unregistered temporary homes. Their vulnerability is therefore increased further due to the absence of the oversight provided by statutory regulation. Operational managers' regular oversight of these children's circumstances does, however, mitigate risk, while extensive searches are made to find suitable and safe homes for these children. However, senior leaders were unaware of these unregistered arrangements.

Children have too many changes of social worker. These changes affect their emotional confidence and the quality and consistency of their relationships and hamper the progress of their plans. When social workers visit children, they often engage with them well. Children's wishes, views and experiences are generally reflected sensitively and kindly in their written records. Direct work to help children understand their histories, although not widespread, is strong when undertaken.

Decisions made for children to come into care are mostly appropriate. Concerted and effective efforts are made to find carers within their families and community to limit the instability in their lives. When that is not possible, children are mostly well matched to carers who meet their needs. Children in care who have a disability live in homes that meet their needs. For those that live further away from home, children are visited with a frequency that matches their needs and circumstances. An advocacy service is offered to children in care. This is an 'opt out' service which increases take-up and work is under way to strengthen engagement further.

When children return home or are placed with their parents under a care order, risk assessments are not always completed quickly enough. The lack of pace in completing risk assessments means that, at the point that children return to live with their parents, leaders cannot always be assured that children's care arrangements are safe and appropriate. However, inspectors did not identify any instances of children placed in situations of significant harm. Plans are not routinely overseen by strong management oversight. Clear senior-level agreement authorising these significant moves is not always evident.

Vulnerable children in care are well supported by a specialist service to tackle exploitation. Practitioners have a detailed knowledge and understanding about the risks and impact of exploitation on children. Children's plans are carefully developed to mitigate risks, promote safety and support children to engage with meaningful education and opportunities to develop their life skills.

Senior leaders have positively risen to the challenge of a sudden and unforeseen increase in the numbers of asylum-seeking children in the county. Children's circumstances are carefully considered, in terms of where children live and the help that they receive. Workers have a strong understanding of the impact of the trauma that these children often suffer. Workers respond sensitively by meeting their physical, emotional and cultural needs to ensure that they are not only safe, but can make progress in their lives and integrate into the community. Services are being developed further and procedures improved, so that initial assessment processes limit the uncertainty for children, both emotionally and practically.

An ongoing focus on ensuring that all children have high-quality personal educational plans is proving successful, thanks in large part to effective support from the virtual school. Most children in care have an educational plan which has been quality-assured, helping to ensure that children receive the educational support they need, including from pupil premium funding. Every child in Year 11 has progressed from school to a college course and every asylum-seeking child receives education or training.

More children are now having their health assessments completed on time. Action has been taken to successfully improve the completion and subsequent recording of these assessments. This improvement helps to ensure that children's identified needs can be responded to. Senior leaders are working with health partners to build on this improvement further.

Children's records and details are not always kept up to date. This, and the absence of summaries about the reasons for social work support, means that for some children it is difficult to be certain about their circumstances and living arrangements. Incomplete documentation makes it harder to respond to children effectively in emergencies and also to achieve clear management oversight of how children's plans are progressed. Additionally, this lack of clarity will not help children and adults accessing their files understand how and why decisions have been taken for them.

The conditions for successful social work practice that drives progress for children at a pace that matches their needs are not consistently in place. For example, management oversight and decision-making to ensure that children's permanence plans are progressed is not routinely clear, timely or accountable. This has meant that for some children, they have waited too long to move to a permanent home or to gain the emotional and practical security of knowing that the home in which they are living will be their permanent home.

IROs do not consistently have the impact they should on improving children's lives. Their role in promoting children's welfare, challenging delays to plans, and holding the local authority's performance as corporate parent to account is underdeveloped. The reviewing process is frustrated by some children's records not being updated prior to reviews taking place. This has led to reviews and care plans not being finished and therefore further affecting management oversight of the progression of children's plans. These issues are compounded by an underused escalation process and the inconsistent monitoring of children's progress between review meetings.

Members of the corporate parenting board are committed to improving the lives of children in care further. They have introduced an increased focus on monitoring key performance data and action planning, although this is at a very early stage of implementation. This work has been strengthened through effective use of peer support and scrutiny with a view to increasing children's voices and engagement further. The children in care council and groups offer a variety of activities and opportunities for children and young people to meet and contribute their views. Although the local authority does have more to do in using children's collective views to shape services, children enjoy and benefit from the activities and events that the children in care council run. Against the backdrop of staff instability, the long-standing nature of these groups provides some positive consistency for children. For example, one child told inspectors how they had benefited from their long-standing relationship with a staff member who had run the group for a number of years.

When children come into care, short-term placement stability is better than in similar local authorities. However, more widely, ensuring that there are sufficient placements to match all children's needs remains a challenge. This is particularly the case for the very small number of children living in unregistered children's homes. Although at an early stage, the local authority has begun planning for three new children's homes, is working to strengthen fostering provision and is taking a lead role on the South West Regional Sufficiency Project.

The local authority's quality assurance framework is appropriate and well focused. However, and despite extensive audit activity, it is not being fully implemented and as a result is not having the level of impact it might do and to which the local authority aspires. Recommendations and learning are not always clearly identified and often lack specificity. This makes it more difficult for learning and recommendations from audits to be used to support improvement, both in work with individual children and at the level of service development.

Senior leaders, with the support of improvement partners, have wisely focused improvement planning on a smaller number of key areas to help to improve children's outcomes, with a focus on performance accountability. These include the quality and timeliness of visits to children and supervision, and ensuring that children's plans are purposeful. Senior leadership capacity is now strengthened and recruitment and retention plans are being implemented. This includes freeing up social workers to concentrate on social work through the use of business support and

improving the electronic recording system. There is still more work to do. Supervision, at its best, shows helpful, reflective discussions and an understanding of the child's experiences but, too often, it is not frequent enough and discussions do not reflect clear action plans that give social workers sufficient direction and timescales. It does not provide a strong enough framework for managers to keep a tight enough track on children's progress and to lessen the negative impact of staff turnover on progress for children.

Social workers value the support from their colleagues and managers and the range of positive opportunities they have for training and development. Social workers are child-focused and talked animatedly to inspectors about the children they care for.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Canto  
**His Majesty's Inspector**