

OFSTED INSPECTION OF CHILDREN IN NEED OF HELP AND PROTECTION, CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND CARE LEAVERS

Children's Social Care



Ofsted introduced a new 'harder test' inspection regime in November 2013. Plymouth's performance was scrutinised over an intensive four week period in October 2014 which involved collecting thousands of pages of files, facts and figures and speaking with hundreds of staff, managers, children and their parents and carers.

In the report published today (6th January 2015) Ofsted found the welfare of children is safeguarded and promoted and saw clear evidence of a skilled, passionate and ambitious staff who act quickly when children need protection and there are no serious failures that leave children being harmed or at risk of harm.

Ofsted found a range of strengths in Plymouth's services for vulnerable children, including:

- The voice of the child and young person is kept at the centre of all work. This is demonstrated at both strategic planning and commissioning levels, and in direct front line practice.
- The workforce are skilled, committed and passionate about working in Plymouth, despite high workloads they are positive about the support they receive from their managers and from each other.
- Family Group Conferences are well established and routinely used to support families and prevent children from coming into care.
- Care proceedings in Plymouth are concluded in an average of 27 weeks. This is good performance and helps reduce uncertainty for children.
- More children in Plymouth leave care through adoption than the national average (In 2013/14, the total was 40)
- The Council has a strong partnership with the local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG).
- A range of innovative work supports children and their families. This includes highly effective psychological interventions in the Parent and Child Assessment Team and the Family Intervention Project (FIP).
- The Children with Disabilities Team and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Service demonstrate good quality, child-focused work.
- Corporate parenting is well embedded across the authority, with a strong commitment to the needs of looked after children from elected members and senior leaders.
- A clear professional development framework is in place for newly qualified social workers during their assessed and supported year in employment, and for staff in their second and third years after qualification.
- The targeted youth support team provides a high level of support to young people over 11 years old, and has prevented young people aged 16 and above coming into care.

The inspectors also acknowledged the pressures the service is under including a significant increase in demand for services in the past 12 months. Since March 2013 this has resulted in a 41 per cent increase in the number of children and young people subject to a child protection plan and a 14 per cent increase in the number of looked after children.

At the time of inspection a total of 409 children and young people were subject to child protection plans, with neglect featuring in 54 per cent, emotional abuse in 29 per cent, physical abuse in 15 per cent and sexual abuse in two per cent.

Plymouth's services for vulnerable children are now judged as 'Requires improvement to be good'.

The inspectors say the council is tackling known weaknesses. Some of the key areas that need improvement include:

- Reducing high caseloads carried by social workers, as well as reducing changes in social workers. The council has been piloting new arrangements to give social workers more time to spend with children and young people and to ensure plans and recording are improved.
- Increasing supervision and oversight of social workers by using the recommendations of an independent review and a new supervision procedure that was put in place in September 2014 but was not fully embedded at time of inspection.
- Improving the number of care leavers that are in education, employment and training by ensuring care leavers are prioritised in schemes designed to increase the number of young people in education, employment and training, including the 1,000 Club and City Deal, as well as by reintroducing mentors, continuing to provide priority places on the Summer Mix Programme and providing Council apprenticeships to care leavers.
- Ensuring partners understand thresholds to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to children's social care, which will help reduce high caseloads. All partners have been trained in thresholds for referrals and the Council will continue to work with them to improve understanding on how to access early help and improve co-ordination of early intervention and prevention services. As part of the council's transformation programme a targeted early help offer through a single point of access is being put in place.
- Updating IT systems so they can deliver more accurate and timely data.
- Although there is currently a widespread awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and good responses by the Council and its partners to children who are or may be experiencing CSE, improvements are being made to the records of return interviews for children who go missing from home and care to make sure they provide thorough information, that can be analysed to form a clear picture of any patterns.

Since the initial feedback was received from Ofsted, existing plans have been reviewed to deliver the rapid improvements to enable the services to be rated as good. Detailed action plans are also now being put into place and will be presented to Cabinet on 13th January 2015.

For the first time, the Ofsted inspection also looked at the work of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and judged that this too 'requires improvement to be good'. Some of the key areas the board will focus on include:

- Ensuring sufficient evaluation of multi-agency training
- Encouraging more schools to engage in safeguarding audits in order to ensure that they are fully effective.

- Making sure that all data is sufficiently comprehensive or accurate in providing information on safeguarding issues, trends and activity.