

Giving children and young people the best start in life

Children's Services Strategic Plan 2021– 2031

Our vision

Giving children and young people the best start in life is a key priority for the Council. Having positive early experiences is a critical factor in determining young people's life outcomes and the council has a key role in ensuring all our children have access to the same opportunities, enabling everyone to reach their full potential and to lead a happy, independent life.

“Every child and young person in South Gloucestershire will have the best start in life, thrive and be prepared for a successful adult life.”



Within safeguarding and prevention, we have a critical responsibility to support those children and young people who are at greatest risk - and who may need the most support - to ensure they are both safe and happy. Our vision is to firstly protect children from harm and then to help them discover their passions, build on their strengths, and fulfil their ambitions to make the best life for themselves.

This strategy sets out how over the next ten years we will work with pace and dedication to deliver on our commitments and making a real difference for local families.

What we want for our children

Achieving our vision will make a significant difference to the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people. We want all the children and young people we work with to:

- ✓ Feel valued, cared for and to know that they are important,
- ✓ Feel safe from harm and know where to go to get help if they need it,
- ✓ Have a settled and happy education which enables them to achieve their full potential,
- ✓ Understand the benefits of a healthy and active life,
- ✓ Be fully prepared for adult life,
- ✓ Be able to tell us what they think and know that they are listened to,
- ✓ Build stronger connections with their area and enjoy growing up in South Gloucestershire.

Our progress

If we are to achieve our ambitions for young people, every family must experience the same high-quality practice. However, we know we're not there yet, and, like Local Authorities up and down the country, we face an extremely challenging backdrop with increasing demand from young people with ever more complex needs and shortages of high-quality staff and specialist support and placements.

We must act consistently and with pace to make the improvements we need to, to deliver on our vision for families.

We can't do it on our own. We have built strong local relationships with partners in education, health, mental health services, police, voluntary and community organisations, and we have made joint commitments to young people.

Our Improvement Plan highlights the immediate steps we are taking to address shortcomings and our Safe, Connected, Thriving practice model sets out how through adopting best practice social work we will make the greatest positive difference for families.

Our priorities

Despite the challenges, we know we must bring greater consistency to our work and we are making commitments to families and to our staff to invest the time and resource to make this happen.

Our commitments to families

- Working with you to provide the right support at the right level and at the right time
- A positive working relationship with your social worker
- Local services, support and placements

Our commitments to staff

- Implementing and resourcing a structure which delivers reduced and manageable caseloads
- Listening to you and acting on your concerns to improve retention and bring greater stability
- High quality supervision and oversight when you need it.

We will be flexible in our approach to meet emerging challenges and demands; deliver our commitments and vision by focusing on four themes:

1. Children at the heart of everything we do
2. Providing the right help in the right way at the right time
3. Delivering social work and safeguarding practice which is consistently of the highest quality
4. Local support to help children build a life in their own community.

Putting children at the heart of everything we do

“Nothing about us without us” is our pledge created with our children in care and those with care experience.

- We will work in partnership with children and young people,
- We will enable them to voice their thoughts, feelings, ambitions and needs
- We will listen to what they have to say and put their interests at the heart of decisions, ensuring they are involved and informed throughout.
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Our priority actions

- ✓ We will strengthen our approach to the Children’s Voice by ensuring we are regularly engaging with children and young people in the ways they want to communicate with us.
- ✓ We will strengthen our focus on relationship-based work with children, young people and families, building trust and delivering better results.
- ✓ We will encourage children and young people to play a full, active role in meetings about them.
- ✓ We will clearly evidence how children and young people’s views are heard and influence the decisions made about them and the plans that are in place to support them.
- ✓ We will undertake additional work to enhance the children’s voice in our services and service developments.
- ✓ We will listen to feedback and complaints from children and young people and learn from what they tell us.

Providing the right help in the right way at the right time

With the right early support from preventative services, children, young people and families achieve better outcomes:

- Improved educational participation/achievement
- Reduced health risks to children
- Reduced involvement with police/judiciary system
- Enables more parents and carers to support children within the family unit
- Lessens need for specialist services in adulthood.

Whilst early intervention is key, we also see too many families experience intrusive services through referral for a social care assessment without then needing further services. This is not good for children and families, and it is not a good use of staff time and expertise.

Our priority actions

- ✓ We will embed the 'Right Help in the Right Time in the Right Way' approach across council teams and partner organisations to ensure only those at risk of harm are considered for social care assessment.
- ✓ We will focus on early help and prevention, ensuring support is coordinated for families who need it.
- ✓ We will work closely with families to reduce the need for intensive support.
- ✓ In times of crisis, we will provide intensive, flexible support, prioritising work to enable children to stay with their families safely.

Delivering social work and safeguarding practice which is consistently of the highest quality

We believe there are four key strands to delivering consistent best-practice social work:

- Ensuring manageable caseloads for staff
- Enabling high quality regular supervision and oversight
- Giving staff the tools they need to make their jobs easier
- Offering high quality training and development, nurturing talent and allowing staff to do their jobs to the best of their abilities

There are no quick fixes and given current recruitment and retention challenges, we know this will take significant investment.

Our priority actions

- ✓ We will implement a staffing structure, which best supports good practice and provides flexibility to meet changing demand. We will resource this structure appropriately to help bring down caseloads.
- ✓ We will develop further recruitment and retention proposals to ensure that we are more competitive in the local market for permanent staff.
- ✓ We will strengthen our focus on 'growing our own', by investing in our Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) Academy.
- ✓ We will invest in our training offer to ensure staff have the skills they need to support the changing needs of children and families.
- ✓ We will give our managers the time and the skills to dedicate to supervision so they can provide appropriate support and challenge for staff.
- ✓ We will develop our support offer to make the best use of skills and expertise and ensure the right people are doing the right tasks.
- ✓ We will continue to embed and develop our social work framework, Signs of Safety across all that we do.
- ✓ We will put appropriate emphasis on recording and evidencing our work.
- ✓ We will focus hard on quality assurance, ensuring our practice is agile and learning is embedded consistently.
- ✓ We will invest in technology and systems which help staff work most effectively.

Local support to help children build a life in their own community

Children want to grow up with their families, with their friends and with people they know locally. Working with partners and foster carers, we believe we can achieve this, bringing benefits for children, families and the council:

- Less disruptive for children and families
- Easier to ensure young people's needs are being met
- More closely aligned with other support services e.g. health and education
- Lower cost

Our priority actions

- ✓ We will recruit more local foster carers and support and upskill them to care for children with complex needs, enabling more young people to be supported in South Gloucestershire.
- ✓ We will work to improve the stability of fostering placements, strengthening relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.
- ✓ We will work with our partners and other Local Authorities in the region to develop more local support, including options for residential provision.
- ✓ We will coordinate our support with other service providers (including mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse services) to provide a more joined-up response.
- ✓ We will continue to develop our Leaving Care offer, including housing and support options for care leavers to enable more young people to live and be supported in the local area.
- ✓ We will focus on education and skills, advancing our Virtual School to support looked after children, and children supported by Child in Need or Child Protection Plans.

Delivering the strategic plan

We have robust processes to monitor and measure performance against this strategy. The aims of the strategic plan are aligned with our broader Council Plan commitments, and progress in delivering the strategic plan will be regularly reported to Cabinet and to Council to ensure members are kept abreast of developments and can support in addressing issues and prioritising focus.

At a more local level, the monthly QA Oversight Forum will review qualitative and quantitative information to ensure that performance reaches the right standard and that we are delivering positive impacts for the children and families we support. We hold regular assurance meetings and our self-assessment is updated to reflect priorities for improvement.

We recognise that we cannot deliver our ambitions on our own and our “Early Help Strategy for Children, Young People and Families” sets out how we will work together to deliver on our joint aims. All partners have signed up to “The Right Help in the Right Way at the Right Time” approach to ensure appropriate support and intervention is targeted at the right children and families.

We have high ambitions, but we are realistic about the task ahead. This strategic plan will be delivered over the next 8-10 years, recognising that achieving sustainable change for children, young people and families is complex and requires sustained commitment from the Council and its partners.