

Leicestershire

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board¹

Inspection date: 14 November 2016 to 8 December 2016

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Children's services in Leicestershire require improvement to be good		
1. Children who need help and protection		Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence		Requires improvement
	2.1 Adoption performance	Requires improvement
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance		Requires improvement

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

Executive summary

Children's services in Leicestershire require improvement to be good. Though the local authority has established cross-party support for children's services' priorities and this has delivered resources for some key services, such as early help and placement sufficiency, other services have not been adequately resourced or effectively led. This has been recognised by the interim director of children's services (DCS) and the interim assistant director for social care who have provided a catalyst for recent improvement work. However, some developments are too new to have had a positive impact, and gaps remain in the quality and consistency of performance data and first-line management oversight and scrutiny.

Children who are at risk of significant harm are identified and protected. However, children potentially in need are not seen in a timely manner and experience delay in receiving the help that they need. Thresholds are not yet applied consistently and, in a small number of cases, inappropriate management decision-making after a section 47 enquiry meant that initial child protection conferences (ICPC) were not convened. This has been acknowledged by the local authority and, during the inspection, it took appropriate steps to both strengthen capacity and improve processes in its First Response Service.

The children's service workforce is relatively stable and a workforce strategy is in place. However, there is insufficient focus on social workers, and there is a lack of developmental programmes for practitioners and first-line managers. This has contributed to an inconsistent application of practice standards when assessing and planning for children. Some social workers are not experiencing regular supervision meetings and, when supervision does take place, it is often not sufficiently directive or reflective. Senior managers are monitoring the regularity of supervision, which is now supported by a reflective group approach. Caseloads in some areas are high, but funding has just been agreed to increase the social work establishment, with the aim of ensuring more manageable caseloads.

An evidence-based model of practice has been implemented across the service and is well embedded. This has been used to engage children and their families in the assessment and planning process better and to ensure that their views are secured. However, the quality of assessments is not yet consistently good, with too many lacking sufficient depth and not informed by meaningful chronologies. Care plans are not specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) and too many support plans for children returning home or discharged from care, subject to a special guardianship order or adoption order, are insufficient to promote sustainability.

The application of the local authority's quality assurance and improvement framework has had some positive impact, for example, with regard to early help evaluation, improvements in placement quality and stability and improved timeliness of children looked after initial health assessments. However, inappropriate processes

operating in the First Response Service have led to the reporting of inaccurate data with regard to contacts, referrals, assessments and their timeliness and the numbers of children allocated. This has prevented the local authority from understanding the true volume of work in this service area and from identifying delays in visiting children.

The local authority's early help offer provides a broad range of effective support and preventative services for children and their families and includes provision of intensive family support. This is having a positive impact on preventing the need for children to become looked after. Work with children at risk of child sexual exploitation is strong, both strategically and operationally, through both mainstream and dedicated services. Although the work to protect children going missing is improving, it lacks consistency, particularly for children looked after, who are not always offered a return home interview or have plans strengthened to mitigate the risks of going missing. While there were some examples of good holistic assessments of disabled children, which led to robust packages of support, their plans are reviewed by non-social work qualified staff and not always based on up-to-date assessments. This means that the local authority cannot be assured that these children's needs continue to be identified effectively and met.

As a corporate parent, the local authority, together with partner agencies, is improving health and education outcomes for children looked after. The quality of placements is good, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by a dedicated team that ensures appropriate consideration of their needs arising from diversity. However, timely access to mental health services is unavailable for too many children looked after, and permanence planning is significantly weaker for those who are achieving permanence through options other than adoption. Adopters are appropriately assessed and well supported to the point of the order being granted. At this point, as with children for whom special guardianship orders are granted, meaningful support to the child and their family ceases to be on offer.

The local authority demonstrates considerable commitment to engaging with children and young people and ensuring their participation, involvement and influence over the shape of service delivery. In so doing, they work collaboratively with a range of young people's representative groups, including two Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) and the Supporting Young People after Care Group. Two members of the CiCC co-chair the corporate parenting board. There are two children's rights officers providing an effective advocacy service for children looked after and for children who are the subject of a child protection conference. A wide range of well-received and well-attended activities are facilitated by a participation officer.

The majority of care leavers are well supported to make the right choices and to live independent lives. The local authority maintains very good contact with them and has worked with partners to improve the range and quality of accommodation available. All care leavers spoken to feel safe in their accommodation. The quality of pathway planning is, however, not consistent, and the support offered by personal

advisers is too variable. Too few care leavers, particularly the most vulnerable, secure a place in further education, employment or training.