

Leicestershire County Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 23 September 2019 to 4 October 2019

Lead inspector: Kate Malleson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Progress has been made in many areas of children's services in Leicestershire since the last inspection in 2016, when all judgements were graded as 'requires improvement to be good'. While services for children in care are now judged to be good, those for children needing help and protection still require improvement to be good. Overall, children are not experiencing good practice consistently enough across all services, and the extent and impact of the remaining areas for improvement are substantial. For these reasons, overall effectiveness requires improvement to be good.

Commitment and investment by political and corporate leaders, together with effective work by staff and senior managers, have meant that responses to the needs of children and families have improved in many areas. Most children in care are settled in good homes with their needs well met, and, for that reason, they make good progress. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation, and the majority are participating in education, training or employment. There is a more timely and effective response when children first need help and protection, including out of hours and for children at risk of sexual exploitation and for

children who go missing, as well as those experiencing the impact of domestic abuse. The quality of assessments has improved, and they now more clearly identify children's needs. Therapeutic support for children in foster care or who have been adopted or achieve permanence through special guardianship has been strengthened. For these reasons, more children and families experience better outcomes.

The quality of social work practice is still too variable, particularly for children needing help and protection. Although the pace of improvement has accelerated in the last 12 months, since the appointment of a permanent director of children's services, core areas of social work practice and management still need to be improved. Plans for children in need or at risk do not always state the specific actions that need to be taken, and most plans lack timeframes for actions to be completed within. These omissions inhibit timely progress. Permanence planning is significantly weaker for those children who are needing permanence through options other than adoption. Supervision of social workers is not of a high enough quality to ensure that social work practice is always effective.

What needs to improve

- The timeliness of assessment and help for children who are not identified as being at immediate risk of significant harm but who live with the impact of cumulative risk and harm.
- The timeliness of work to secure positive change for children during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline.
- The quality and consistency of social work practice in care planning, including the quality of supervision and oversight to prevent unnecessary drift and delay for children.
- The quality of case recording to enable new workers to more easily understand a child's history and circumstances.
- Planning for permanence for children whose plan is not adoption.
- Monitoring of the quality and appropriateness of alternative education provision for children in care.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children and families can access a good variety of targeted early help services, which support parents to safely care for their children. However, some children wait too long to access this support. Senior managers are aware that the steps which are built into the system at the front door through early help triage and

subsequent allocation to the appropriate early help service are unnecessarily difficult.

2. There has been some improvement in the quality of referrals since the implementation of a newly designed multi-agency referral form in April 2019. Prior to this, the quality of referrals from partner agencies about children who need help and protection was too variable. When there is a lack of information, this causes delay while more information is sought to inform decision-making. The improved form and shared language enable professionals to be specific about concerns and to keep positive factors in mind. It also helps parents to be clearer about their requests. This added clarity facilitates timelier decision-making to meet children's needs.
3. Children receive a timely and effective response when they need help and protection in the evenings and at weekends. Risk is responded to swiftly, and action is taken to ensure that children are protected. This includes holding strategy discussions out of normal office hours. Thorough recording means that it is clear what immediate actions have been taken and what the next steps are to ensure that children's ongoing needs are assessed and responded to appropriately.
4. Children at risk of immediate harm are seen early, and initial assessments of their needs are prompt. Improvements in the first response service mean that checks are now timelier and thresholds are more clearly understood. Consent is routinely sought or dispensed with when appropriate.
5. Management oversight of high-risk duty work is firmly in place. Strategy meetings are usually prompt and result in clear actions and timescales. However, there are sometimes delays when cases are already open, and instead of police attending in person, reports are sent in. This means that there is no shared discussion about the most current presenting risks to children.
6. Child protection enquiries are thorough, and a clear rationale for the decision to begin section 47 enquiries is recorded. Most initial child protection conferences are timely, and children receive help quickly.
7. Work with police, education and health partners is mostly a strength. Information is efficiently shared, contributes to assessments and planning, and influences decisions about how to safeguard children.
8. Although improving, the quality of assessments remains variable. More recent assessments are better at identifying the impact for children of cumulative risk, but for a small minority of children, there is insufficient analysis of the risks that they are exposed to. A lack of effective action and planning for a small number of children living in circumstances of chronic neglect or domestic abuse means that their circumstances do not improve quickly enough. These children have

remained in neglectful or harmful circumstances for longer than they should have.

9. Where children are not at immediate risk of harm, assessments are not undertaken swiftly enough. Sometimes there is a delay in allocating to a worker, children are not seen quickly enough, and recommendations are not routinely signed off as management decisions. Some of these children experience delay in receiving help because of the lack of urgency in progressing actions which would improve their daily lived experiences.
10. The quality of plans is not consistent. Stronger plans are rooted in a thorough assessment and are specific and clear about expectations and timeframes for improvements to be made. Weaker plans lack clear, specific timeframes for action and are not sufficiently clear about what needs to happen and who is responsible for making it happen. While the use of the social work methodology helpfully clarifies and articulates the concerns and strengths, this enhanced understanding does not consistently translate into effective positive action. Where there are multiple children in a family, the needs of individual children are sometimes lost. For some children, the ineffectiveness of poor-quality plans is further compounded by weak management oversight. This combination causes drift and delay for children, who then wait too long for their circumstances to improve.
11. Children in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline (PLO) wait too long for social workers and managers to formulate plans and act to achieve positive change for them. Letters written to parents help them to understand what they need to do to prevent court proceedings. Weaker letters include complex social work terminology that prevents parents from having absolute clarity about what the concerns are and when the changes are needed. Management oversight of planning and tracking needs to be more robust so that delay is reduced for all children. An appropriate plan is in place to address this, with some progress evident, but an even sharper focus is needed.
12. Social workers feel well supported by their managers. Management oversight is visible on case records, but the impact that managers have on case progression is too variable and does not prevent children from waiting too long to achieve positive change. This is because supervision is not regular, there is limited evidence of analysis or reflective practice, and it does not lead to specific or challenging actions with timescales for completion that are followed up and children's progress monitored.
13. Although most social workers know their children well, and take care to understand their wishes and feelings, records do not consistently reflect the positive work they do. In some cases, there has been a lack of persistence in developing a relationship with a child or young person and a lack of evidence of trying to build this. The phrases 'hard to engage' or 'does not engage' are then used inappropriately in case records.

14. Children's rights officers support children well to express their views during conferences and reviews, including good engagement by these workers with children in the PLO. Children using this service value the listening ear of advocates, but a minority expressed frustration about their relationships with their social workers, and about the impact their social workers had on their lives.
15. Disabled children who need help and protection receive a good service. They are seen regularly, according to their plan, and are supported effectively by social workers who know them well. Risks and vulnerabilities are well understood, and a variety of help is provided to meet their needs, including the use of short breaks and access to leisure activities and physical aids.
16. Timely pre-birth assessments are undertaken to assess the risks to unborn babies, and these lead to appropriate child protection planning. This includes providing support to parents before and after the birth, which enables parents to care for their baby safely. In a small minority of cases, pre-birth assessments had not progressed quickly enough. This meant that risk could not be mitigated and mothers and babies were separated at birth while work was completed. The local authority has used learning from speaking to these parents about how this creates stress for families at birth and might be preventable with earlier action. As a result, they had already delivered specific workshops to further improve practice to minimise the risk of unnecessary separation at birth.
17. The impressive Vulnerability Hub is effective in safeguarding children and young people who are at risk of harm or who are experiencing harm from sexual exploitation, as well as those who go missing from home and from care. Strong multi-agency collaboration and investment enable teams of specialist social workers, police and other staff to quickly share information, fully consider historical concerns, and to make effective decisions which safeguard and minimise the risks to children and young people. Return interviews are comprehensive, include children's views and are completed in a timely manner, with information used to inform work with individual children and wider disruption activity.
18. Although work to address child sexual exploitation is well established and embedded, the local authority and police partners acknowledge further work is needed to understand the true scale of child criminal exploitation in Leicestershire and to develop an equally effective response. Training and awareness-raising activity following the discovery of several active county lines has been effective in increasing the number of referrals which link sexual and criminal exploitation. The multi-agency co-located child sexual exploitation team is suitably evolving into a child criminal exploitation team, with the modern slavery and human trafficking team now appropriately aligned alongside. An additional service manager in First Response, who has operational responsibility for child criminal exploitation, means that there is an increased and important

focus on the development of work to prevent the criminal exploitation of children.

19. Where children live in homes in which domestic abuse and violence is a concern, there is prompt and effective information-sharing and careful consideration of risk and history. This leads to appropriate early intervention or signposting to relevant services. In contrast, in cases where risk is less urgent, and which are referred to the early help service, there is delay in families receiving support because of the cumbersome triage system. The local authority had identified this issue, which is being addressed by senior managers.
20. Allegations against professionals and carers are treated seriously, and there is an effective process in place to respond to allegations which meet the threshold of concern. The local authority has recognised that the current use of email processes means that there is not an effective system in place to measure the capacity and volume of work. Further development is also needed to analyse and understand patterns and trends of low-level concerns which might need to be addressed.
21. Private fostering assessments are thorough. They consider the views of the children and their parents and assess the capacity of the carer to meet the specific needs of the child they are caring for. The local authority has identified the need to streamline the referral and assessment process so that children are seen more quickly. Positively, children living in private fostering arrangements are seen regularly by their social worker to monitor their well-being during and beyond the assessment process. This continuing oversight ensures that their welfare is regularly reviewed and helps to ensure their safety.
22. The local authority has effective systems in place to monitor the welfare of children who are electively home educated, as well as those who are missing from education. Extra attention is given to the oversight of vulnerable children, including those who have an education, health and care plan. Joined-up work between different service areas and sharp tracking systems minimise the risk to young people who are out of education.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is: good

23. Most children in care and care leavers make good progress, and their lives are better because of the improved and good services they now receive in Leicestershire. They are settled and live in homes which meet their needs and they thrive because of the good standard of care they receive. Many children receive regular visits from social workers at above the statutory minimum level. Social workers are good at ensuring that children's health and education needs are met through regular health and education reviews, and additional resources are sought and commissioned where necessary. Social workers have manageable workloads, so they can get to know the children well and undertake

direct work to help children understand their life experiences and journey into care. Homeless young people eligible to become looked after are informed of their rights and accommodated when it is in their best interests. Most children come into care when it is necessary and appropriate to do so. However, for a few children, this is not in a planned or timely manner, making it harder for them to settle when they do come into care.

24. Children return home from care when it is safe to do so, because their parents have been well supported to make the necessary changes and because risks have reduced. A few children have waited too long for their care orders to be revoked after moving back home to live with their parents. This means they have been subject to unnecessary statutory intervention for too long.
25. Children achieve permanence through adoption within the right timescales. The local authority has strengthened the service through structural changes, such as bringing the completion of child permanence reports into the adoption service. As a result, the quality of reports and support plans has improved, which in turn supports better matching and earlier planning and family finding for children. Investment in several specialist posts, including a life-story worker and birth records counsellor, strengthens the service further. The adoption panel and agency decision-maker provide a good gatekeeping service and offer challenge to ensure that the correct decisions are made for children. Children who have achieved permanence through adoption and special guardianship benefit from effective post-placement support.
26. Care planning for children who achieve permanence other than through adoption is not good enough. A full range of permanence options is considered for children, but a lack of robust management oversight and consistent challenge from independent review officers (IROs) leads to drift and delay for some children achieving permanence through long-term fostering and special guardianship. Although most children do not experience instability in their long-term foster placements, because they have not been formally matched to their permanent carers, they do not benefit from having absolute certainty about their living arrangements. Similarly, some children wait too long to achieve permanence via special guardianship orders (SGOs), which means that these children experience statutory intervention for longer than necessary.
27. The written plans for children in long-term foster care, are lengthy and difficult for the children to understand. Actions are sometimes vague and lack timescales, making it unclear exactly who will be doing what and by when to ensure that children's permanence and day-to-day needs are going to be met.
28. Brothers and sisters benefit from well-considered assessments about whether they should live together or apart. These assessments contain a strong analysis of children's individual needs and circumstances. When some brothers and sisters cannot live together, their important relationship is mostly supported

- through regular time together. Other children have complicated family time arrangements, which are sensitively managed and supported.
29. Most children in care have developed positive and trusting relationships with social workers who they have known for many years and who visit them regularly. These children have benefited from effective relationship-based practice, which has helped them to understand why they came into care, including through life-story work. The local authority has invested in an innovative electronic system which captures and stores personal information, records and memories for children in care. They feel secure in the knowledge that they have a consistent worker who they can trust. A small minority of children have experienced too many changes in social worker because of turnover in the workforce, which has made it harder for them to develop trusting or positive relationships.
 30. When changes of social workers occur, an absence of up-to-date chronologies and case summaries in children's records hinders the new workers' ability to quickly learn about the experiences of children. Similarly, placement plans are not always up to date. This gap in data does not help to inform planning or prevent children from having to repeat their stories.
 31. Where necessary, children in care and care leavers are linked with children's rights officers, who help them to express their views at statutory reviews. Independent visitors are available and carefully matched to children in care. Some children have benefited from the continuity of a visitor over some years, which has helped to mitigate the impact of other changes in their lives.
 32. The Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Supporting Young People After Care (SYPAC) group are an impressive assembly of children and young people who feel listened to and valued by the highly visible and effective lead member and other senior leaders. Their participation enhances their negotiation skills and helps develop their confidence and self-esteem. They are proud of the recent contact expectations statement, approved by senior leaders, which will enhance children and young people's family time experiences. Prospective foster carers hear from these groups of children and young people about what makes a good foster carer and placement, as well as about the types of complex needs that some children in care have. This enhances their understanding about the needs of children in care.
 33. The local authority is aspirational for its children in care and care leavers and holds regular events that celebrate their achievements. Children in care enjoy a range of social, sporting and creative activities that help to boost their self-confidence and are fun. One child said, 'Being in care has given me opportunities I wouldn't have.' Many children have been successful in achieving awards for their talents.
 34. The virtual school can demonstrate that work to enhance children's personal development is helping them to make better progress in their learning. School

staff speak positively about the quality of support they receive from the virtual school and the impact it has on their children. Virtual school staff work well as a team to support children in care and to provide wider enrichment activity, but there is more work to do to capture the impact of wider enrichment activity on children's progress. Effective work has improved the quality and consistency of personal education plans. A few children attend non-registered alternative provision. Although leaders know that the children are safe, they have insufficient oversight of the quality of education provided in these settings. Leaders are aware of, and have suitable plans in place to address, this.

35. Risk is well identified and managed for children in care and care leavers. This also includes the response to children placed in Leicestershire by other local authorities. Most children receive a prompt and effective response when they go missing from care. Vigorous activity is undertaken to locate them and ensure their safety. Children's views are carefully elicited through comprehensive return interviews, during which the reasons for going missing are fully explored. Social workers respond sensitively to their concerns. The local authority adopts an appropriately pragmatic and individualised approach when making decisions about how to minimise the risk of further missing episodes for the most highly vulnerable teenagers.
36. Children's physical and emotional health needs are mostly well monitored, and they have all the checks they need. The local authority proactively commissions additional resources where specific need is identified by the 'strengths and difficulties' questionnaires. Although social workers express difficulty in accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service support for children in care, therapeutic support, such as art and equine therapy, is accessed independently and funded through the pupil premium or by the local authority. Care leavers spoken to do not recall being given information about their health history, and although the local authority intends for this information to be available to them electronically, this is not yet in place.
37. Most children in care live in homes that meet their needs, where they can settle and achieve the stability that has often not been a feature of their early lives. Where appropriate, brothers and sisters live together in good quality, stable foster homes that meet their needs to a high standard. Children who live out of Leicestershire are not at a disadvantage, and they receive the same good level of support.
38. Foster carers and children in foster care homes are well supported. Carers are appropriately challenged in supervision and continue to access relevant training. A dedicated placement support team supports specialist foster carers and provides effective and intensive support to placements where children have more complex needs. This includes young people who are moving from residential care into family homes. A range of wraparound therapeutic services, including theraplay and dyadic developmental psychotherapy, are delivered by specialist practitioners and clinicians. This trauma-informed approach is

improving the stability of children's placements with their foster families and is enabling more children in care to experience family life.

39. A dedicated and knowledgeable team of social workers, personal advisers and education staff provides an effective service to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. These young people live in suitable accommodation, learn English and access education. Personal advisers support them to develop independent living skills and to move into their own tenancies.
40. Care leavers value the support they receive from personal advisers who know them well and who understand their past lived experiences. The local authority is in touch with nearly all of its care leavers. Personal advisers visit regularly, often over and above what is required on the pathway plan, and according to current needs and changes in circumstances. They support young people at the start of university courses or during the move from supported to independent living. Young people's accommodation needs are addressed flexibly and responsively, and they are offered individualised support to help them to access employment and education opportunities. A majority of care leavers are making good progress through council apprenticeships, employment and further education.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is: good

41. Since the last inspection in 2016, the local authority has appropriately prioritised children's social care with the allocation of additional funding and resources. These have substantially improved service performance in specific areas, such as responses at the front door, the quality of assessments, and strong post-adoption and special guardianship support. Improvement activity and analysis is well informed by a strong culture of learning from a wide range of sources, which increasingly include feedback from service users, and are underpinned by accurate data, an embedded model of social work practice and reduced social worker caseloads. Most areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been acted on. The local authority has a good understanding of the remaining practice shortfalls, which is consistent with inspection findings and has appropriate plans in place to continue its journey of improvement.
42. There has been a noticeable increase in the pace of improvement activity since the appointment of the current director of children's services 12 months ago. Her commitment to improving the lives of children is evident, and she has established her credibility and earned the confidence of members, staff and corporate leaders.
43. The local authority is a good corporate parent. The highly visible and effective lead member is vastly experienced and is a strong advocate not only for Leicestershire's children in care and care leavers, but also for children in need of

help and protection. He has a depth of knowledge about the key issues for children who need statutory services and is therefore able to provide effective and rigorous challenge and oversight to senior leaders. Children and young people value the contact they have with him because 'he always does what he says he is going to do'.

44. Partnerships with other agencies are well established and strong. They underpin innovative work, such as the development of the vulnerability hub with police and neighbouring local authorities. School leaders value the improved and more timely response to their concerns and referrals, and the quality and impact of training provided on attachment and trauma, as well as advice and guidance about alternatives to exclusion. The police, local judiciary and CAFCASS describe positive relationships and confidence in the current local authority senior leaders, who are regarded as open and realistic about the challenges they face.
45. The local authority has successfully reduced caseloads for frontline staff, and this means that they have more time available to get to know their children well. However, half of the senior practitioners are still carrying larger caseloads than the local authority has planned for, and this reduces their capacity to undertake wider developmental work with staff. The capacity of IROs has been strengthened in response to increasing caseloads.
46. Leaders have responded appropriately to the need to reduce paperwork so that social workers can spend more time with children and families. Electronic forms and templates have been redesigned, and this reduces duplication.
47. An effective range of performance management processes means that senior leaders and managers know their services well. No major weaknesses were identified by the inspection that leaders were not already aware of and already acting on. Accurate performance information is systematically used to understand the effectiveness of service delivery and the impact of improvement activity. Senior leaders and the lead member are suitably involved with monthly keeping in touch with practice visits and practice weeks, which give them an insight into practice on the ground and provide an opportunity for social workers and managers to describe challenges and successes.
48. The safeguarding improvement and quality assurance service undertakes a comprehensive cycle of auditing activity which feeds into the programme of workshops delivered by the Practice Excellence Team (PET). Very successful 'warm' audits that include worker and service user feedback have deepened understanding of the impact of practice and mean that the local authority is well placed to improve children's experiences further.
49. There is a well-established social work model of practice throughout children's services which underpins practice improvement activity. The shared language and methodology are routinely supported by the PET through its training and development programme. Further expansion of this team is evidence of a

continuing commitment to improvement activity. Partners are also familiar with the methodology, which helps families to better understand the concerns that professionals have.

50. While significant improvement has been achieved in a wide range of service areas, actions to address some deficits have not had sufficient impact. So, while leaders have initiated campaigns to improve the quality of plans and the impact of frontline management supervision, these have not led to consistent or sustained improvements in frontline practice.
51. Maintaining a stable and sufficiently qualified workforce is recognised as an ongoing and significant challenge for Leicestershire, and an appropriate workforce strategy is in place that is having a positive impact. This includes a commitment to recruit social workers over establishment and thereby reduce the use of agency staff and reduce caseloads. Additional strategies include a focus on 'growing our own' and improved support for ASYEs and frontline social workers who increasingly value the support and opportunities for learning being provided. An appropriate focus on increasing the emotional well-being and resilience of the workforce and enabling career progression through the aspiring managers course are part of a holistic workforce strategy to improve workforce stability. As a result, more social workers are choosing to continue to work in Leicestershire, and recruitment and retention are improving.

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