

Inspection of Leicestershire County Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 22 April to 3 May 2024

Lead inspector: Ceri Evans, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Services for children and families in Leicestershire have much improved since the previous inspection in 2019, when the judgement for overall effectiveness was 'requires improvement to be good'. Significant progress has been made across all service areas. This improvement has been underpinned by an ambitious and child-focused senior leadership team that has successfully created a culture whereby the experiences and progress of children are at the heart of social work practice.

Leaders have proactively engaged in the current national social care reform developments and have recently introduced a well-considered family safeguarding and family help model. Most children in care and care leavers receive an outstanding service from workers, who know them extremely well. The vast majority of children live in stable homes with carers who are supportive and ambitious for children. Personal advisers (PAs) are tenacious and determined in working with care leavers to improve their experiences and outcomes for the future.

Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for further development in their services, informed by a thorough and accurate self-assessment.

What needs to improve?

- Monitoring of pre-proceedings to tackle drift and delay and the accessibility of letters before proceedings.
- Timeliness of initial child protection conferences.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and families benefit from a good early help offer and have access to a broad range of preventative and targeted services. The growing number of community-based family hubs is providing effective support that addresses children's needs and builds on their family's strengths. Early help assessments are comprehensive and lead to timely interventions for most families. In some cases, there are minor delays in starting work with families. Leaders are aware of this and are working to reduce waiting times.
2. When children's needs change, processes for stepping up to and down from statutory social care are understood and carefully applied by workers. Higher-risk children's cases are escalated swiftly from targeted early intervention to children's social care or are appropriately stepped down to universal and targeted support when risks have reduced.
3. Sector reforms are well understood by leaders and positive action has been taken to reshape services to children and their families. A new family help service brings together targeted early help and work with children in need, alongside family hubs. For some children in need, their plans are progressed by a family key worker and the work is overseen by a senior social worker, who maintains good oversight of children's experiences and progress. Those children in need who require ongoing social work involvement are allocated a social worker. Although this model of practice is in its infancy, the direction of travel is positive. Children and their families are provided with the right level and type of support at the right time.
4. There is an effective and timely response to contacts from professionals and members of the public, to ensure that children's needs are met at the earliest opportunity. Contacts in the 'front door' are responded to quickly and according to the level of need and risk in the presenting information. The need for parental consent is understood and appropriately sought. Decisions to override consent are proportionate, with managers recording a clear rationale for these decisions. Experienced workers and managers in the out-of-hours team provide effective emergency help and protection to children.
5. Social workers understand children's past histories and the impact of cumulative harm. Their analysis is well considered, and actions are well matched to the child's needs and level of assessed risk. Management oversight of the front door is thorough, and decision-making is evident on all contacts and at different

stages of the referral process. Changes of worker are kept to a minimum, but when they are necessary, they are carefully planned so that intervention continues without delay and the child benefits from the right service at the right time.

6. When children are at risk of immediate harm, prompt action is taken to understand their circumstances and to better safeguard them. Decision-making is proportionate and leads to appropriate actions, including the decision to undertake child protection investigations. Children are seen promptly by their social worker after a strategy meeting to ensure that there is oversight of their well-being and safety.
7. Assessments are timely, comprehensive and of good quality. The views of children and their families are well evidenced in children's records and inform assessment outcomes. Assessments provide succinct evidence of risks to children where appropriate, with a clear analysis by the social worker. Assessments show a detailed understanding of the family history and the impact of family behaviours on the current circumstances for children. Risks are appropriately identified during the assessment stage, and this leads to coherent plans that better promote children's safety and well-being.
8. When children are identified to be at risk of significant harm, decisions to convene an initial child protection conference are appropriate. The information shared in these meetings is used well to identify risks to children and clear actions are agreed. However, the convening of quorate initial conferences has been delayed for some children. This is due to the fact that some conferences have needed to be rearranged due to non-attendance of partner agencies. Consequently, a small number of children have experienced some drift in multi-agency decision-making regarding whether a child protection plan is necessary.
9. Core groups and child-in-need planning meetings are held regularly and well recorded. There is good-quality and up-to-date information-sharing about children and their families across relevant agencies. These meetings appropriately consider progress against plans. Family members and, where appropriate, children are helped to attend these meetings. They are supported by sensitive workers so that their views can be shared and responded to.
10. Most child protection and child-in-need plans are realistic and identify clear, desired outcomes, making it easy for parents and children to understand any concerns. Plans are increasingly child-focused. They are written to the child, which helps to capture the child's lived experience.
11. Visits to children in need and those subject to child protection planning are regular. Visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. For younger children and disabled children, workers carefully select their communication methods to enable them to understand their relationships with parents and other family

members. Social workers know their children well and develop effective relationships with parents, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change.

12. Pre-proceedings activity under the Public Law Outline is appropriately initiated when child protection planning has not been effective in reducing risks to children. Legal gateway meetings are used well to analyse the risks to children and determine threshold decisions. The recording of these meetings is detailed and leads to effective planning for most children. Letters before proceedings, although consistently sent to parents, are not always written in a language that enables parents to understand the changes being asked of them.
13. For some children, pre-proceedings activity has been successful in diverting families away from court proceedings. However, a small number of children are currently experiencing prolonged periods in pre-proceedings. This means that improvements and decisions for these children have not been achieved quickly enough. Positively, the introduction of a case progression manager role is providing leaders with a greater understanding of the progress of pre-proceedings work and the causes of delay. This is a positive development, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact.
14. Children at risk of extra-familial harm benefit from specialist support, interventions and timely assessment from highly skilled multidisciplinary workers in the vulnerability hub. Daily multi-agency meetings take place to enable professionals to review intelligence and risks effectively. The impact of these processes is helping professionals to be informed, to map activity and networks, and to undertake disruption work to reduce the risk of harm.
15. Children who frequently go missing from home and are at risk of exploitation in the community receive determined and impactful support from specialist workers in the vulnerability hub. Workers are tenacious in trying to engage children who have been missing, making good use of return home interviews. Information from return home interviews is used effectively to inform individual risk assessments and helps professionals to identify wider risks to children.
16. The edge-of-care service, families together team, provides a swift response and service to children and their families when there is a risk of family breakdown. Specialist workers provide therapeutically informed interventions to help repair and strengthen fragile relationships. Packages of support help to stabilise and enhance children's lives and, in most circumstances, they are preventing family breakdown.
17. Allegations against professionals are dealt with thoroughly and swiftly by the local authority designated officer (LADO). The quality of performance management information collated by the LADO has significantly improved since the last inspection.

18. Children who live in private fostering arrangements are assessed by knowledgeable and skilled social workers, who support them, visit them regularly and know them well.
19. Children aged 16 and 17 at risk of homelessness are appropriately engaged in further assessment, in line with a joint housing protocol. Children's risks and current circumstances are understood, and this leads to appropriate responses to meet their needs, including their right to become looked after.
20. Young carers in Leicestershire are well supported by workers who understand the challenges children face. Workers offer bespoke individual support alongside group work where children can meet others who have similar experiences to their own. One child said, 'Being a young carer is hard work and demanding, but the help I've had has made a massive difference. I have been encouraged to share my views with council leaders and this has made a difference for me and other young carers. Going to the groups has also been good. It's been a friendly, welcoming and safe place for me to go and share my experiences.'
21. Effective systems are in place to monitor and support children who are missing from education and those who are electively home educated. Leaders ensure that they collect the information they need from partnership services to check that vulnerable children are protected and that they receive the additional support that they need. For children missing education, the authority ensures that education is promoted as the protective factor that vulnerable children need. For children who do not attend school, bespoke packages of education provision are tailored to meet individual need. There has been a significant and ongoing rise in the numbers of children being electively home educated. The authority has thorough oversight of these children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

22. Most children in care receive an outstanding service that results in their life experiences significantly improving. Social workers and managers are aspirational for the children in their care and demonstrate a determination to improve children's experiences. There is a strong commitment by leaders, managers and social workers to support children to remain with their families where appropriate. A broad range of support services are in place to achieve this, providing children and their families with the best opportunity to stay together.
23. When it is not possible for children to remain living with their birth parents, social workers secure alternative permanence plans for them as quickly as possible. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments that enable most children to be placed with carers who meet their needs. Thorough management oversight is evident, and this ensures that all avenues have been explored and the most appropriate placement is identified.

24. Consideration of kinship care is particularly strong. Social workers go to great lengths to identify safe family members with whom children can live. Assessments of potential carers within the family are timely and they are completed thoroughly, identifying how the longer-term needs of children will be met. Children living in kinship arrangements or with special guardians benefit from effective support plans. A highly skilled support team provides additional help to those carers during times of need. This intervention is underpinned by therapeutic values and has been successful in helping to ensure that children experience stability in a home that is helping to enhance their sense of identity and belonging.
25. If a return home is planned, good risk assessments ensure that it is safe to do so. Where appropriate, placement with parent regulations are used. Senior managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) appropriately ratify the decision. Support plans are well managed and monitored.
26. Leicestershire staff work effectively with both the family courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. These partners express confidence in social work practice. Applications to court are timely, and evidence provided to the court is of a good standard.
27. When a decision has been taken that adoption is the right plan for permanence, planning is highly effective. Leicestershire is part of a regional adoption agency (Family Adoption Links) and liaison between social workers and the regional adoption agency is effective, which helps to ensure that family finding happens quickly. When adoption is agreed, the child and their adopters are extremely well supported through their adoption journey. A range of support, including specialist therapeutic support, is swiftly put in place to sustain adoptive placements. This means that most children thrive with their new family.
28. Many children in Leicestershire achieve permanence through long-term fostering. The confirmation of permanence via a panel helps to give children the sense of belonging that they need. Matching processes are thorough and fully informed by children's views. A small number of children have experienced delay in having the decision for permanence ratified at panel due to capacity issues. Leaders have realistic plans in place to minimise further delay for children, for example by putting on additional panels when needed.
29. Foster carers say that they feel well supported. They are offered consistent and reliable support from their social workers. Foster carers feel that their voices are valued and listened to by the service. There is a family ethos in the fostering service and the foster carers understand and value this approach.
30. Most children live in or close to Leicestershire in homes that meet their needs. These children are visited regularly by their social workers, have access to education and health specialists, and take part in a range of activities of their choosing.

31. Since the last inspection, further work has been undertaken to develop the local authority's own provision, in partnership with known providers. Applications have been made to register these children's homes with Ofsted. This is intended to widen the array of placements available to children.
32. A small number of children in care live in unregistered children's homes for short periods of time. Stringent efforts are being made by leaders to help these providers to register with Ofsted. In addition, there is thorough senior management and social work oversight of these unsuitable arrangements.
33. Siblings are supported to live together when this is in their best interests. When this is not possible, careful consideration is given to preserving these relationships. Family time arrangements are encouraged and supported where appropriate. Extensive efforts are made by workers to engage with children's wider family, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles. This helps children to preserve those important family links.
34. Children are seen regularly and are seen alone where appropriate. Manageable workloads mean that skilled social workers can spend quality time with children to get to know them well and build strong and enduring relationships with them. Social workers speak highly about the children they work with and they positively beamed when talking about children's progress and achievements. The relationships that social workers have with children are a notable strength. This gives children much-needed stability and helps them to feel cared for and cared about.
35. Children in care benefit from creative, insightful and beautifully presented life-story work. This shows children how their life experiences are valued. This work is routinely carried out with children at their pace and to their timescales, and this assists them to understand their journey. Purposeful direct work is also of a high quality and reflects children's individual circumstances, wishes and feelings. Social workers are extremely skilled at helping children to understand why decisions have been reached and what the plans are for their longer-term care.
36. Disabled children are supported to develop trusting relationships with their social workers. Workers recognise when children are not happy and invest time in understanding why, advocating on children's behalf. Workers are rightly proud of the progress children make and are ambitious for them.
37. Care plans are comprehensive and are effectively reviewed within the required timescale by IROs who often have long-standing relationships with children and know them well. Children are supported to attend their review meetings and access advocacy when needed. Review minutes and reports are written to the child. They are of high quality, easy to understand and show the child's journey and experiences.

38. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children benefit from a specialist service with workers who have a comprehensive understanding of their needs. Social workers in the UAS children team have a thorough understanding of the trauma children have experienced, as well as their cultural and linguistic needs. This leads to child-centred planning and specialist intervention that meets children's needs well.
39. Risks to children in care related to exploitation and being missing from home are quickly recognised. Processes to support these children help to identify harm and enable professionals to share information at the earliest opportunity. Mapping and risk meetings ensure robust oversight. Safety planning is meticulous, which helps to ensure that agencies are clear about what actions are needed to reduce risk to children.
40. Children are helped to stay healthy. Their physical and emotional health needs are understood and reviewed, and plans are developed to meet need. Children have access to routine health checks such as opticians and dental checks. Therapeutic support is also provided to children when needed. Children can access support from the in-house teen health team or via a wide range of therapeutic support, which is tailored to children's individual needs.
41. The virtual school is ambitious in ensuring that most children in care make excellent educational progress at school or in other provisions. The virtual school works effectively in close partnership with schools to ensure that vulnerable children receive the right provision and the support that they need. Personal education plans are of a consistently high quality. Strong monitoring processes are in place to ensure that the high expectations of the virtual school are upheld and that no child in their care slips through the net.
42. Children in care are encouraged to engage in hobbies and activities that increase their confidence and help them to develop new skills. They are given every opportunity to try new things and enjoy experiences similar to their peers.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

43. Care leavers in Leicestershire benefit from advice and support from a stable, committed and passionate group of PAs. The service has been strengthened since the last inspection to provide additional specialist workers and increase the range of resources available.
44. PAs know their care leavers extremely well, recognising their strengths and vulnerabilities. Children in care are allocated a PA at an early stage of their journey towards leaving care, which helps them to build positive, trusting and lasting relationships with their PAs before their transition to adulthood. Care leavers are typically highly positive about the support they receive, particularly in the relationships that they have built with their PAs and social workers.

45. Many care leavers in Leicestershire remain in contact with the service and have long-standing links with their PA. PAs act as good parents would and routinely encourage care leavers to continue to access help if needed, and most do. There is thoughtful discussion about care leavers' next stage in life and what help and guidance is available to them. If care leavers do choose to opt out of receiving a service, they can opt back in at any time. Care leavers say that staff often continue to keep in touch via text and email, sometimes meeting for 'coffee catch-ups'. This is something care leavers value greatly as they know that someone is there to listen to them.
46. PAs are excellent role models and lead by example. They fiercely champion the rights of care leavers. Inspectors saw many examples of workers going above and beyond to ensure that care leavers have the support that they need. Feedback from care leavers themselves was also extremely positive. One care leaver said, 'The service I have received has changed my life. My PA is kind, and they care about me.' Another said, 'The service has been amazing and over time they have helped out as much as they can.'
47. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive and ambitious local offer. The published offer is easy to navigate on the council website and promotes an array of resources. This is a lifelong offer, enabling care leavers to return for support at any age. Care leavers have actively contributed to the development of the offer and PAs ensure that care leavers fully understand what support is available to them. This includes accessing funding for help with purchasing the essential things that care leavers need in life. While care leavers confirm that the offer is accessible, their records of what they have accessed are not always clear in their plans, making uptake difficult to track.
48. Care leavers can access a range of suitable accommodation and they are well supported to prepare for adulthood. Some care leavers have remained with their foster carers through staying-put arrangements, while others live in supported accommodation or have their own tenancy. A small number of care leavers live in unsuitable accommodation. In these instances, PAs maintain close contact with the care leaver and other professionals, such as in housing services, to ensure that the care leaver's living arrangements improve.
49. Care leavers' physical and emotional health are prioritised by the service. Care leavers' health summaries contain useful information to help them to understand their needs and provide guidance about where to access health advice in the future should they need this, although records do not consistently show if these summaries have been shared with the care leaver.
50. There is a strong focus on strengthening mental health services for care leavers. PAs have an excellent awareness and understanding of care leavers' emotional well-being needs and support them to access appropriate services. The introduction of an emotional well-being worker and a strengthening relationships engagement worker has provided additional resource and many care leavers are

benefiting from their advice, guidance and targeted interventions. When necessary, private therapy sessions are purchased by the local authority to address care leavers' well-being needs.

51. Care leavers are actively involved in creating their own pathway plans. Pathway plans contain the care leaver's own words and reflect their interests and aspirations for the future. In the main, care leavers have a sense of ownership of their plan and are working towards their goals in life. However, there is some variability in the quality of information in some plans. Leaders are aware of this and have recently appointed a senior practitioner in the care leaving team to help to further enhance practice.
52. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers receive a good level of help, including practical and emotional well-being support. PAs are extremely knowledgeable about unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people's traumatic experiences. They provide appropriate and well-informed support for these young people's asylum applications.
53. PAs have a thorough understanding of risk. They know their care leavers well and understand their complex needs. PAs talk openly with care leavers about how to better manage their frustrations and they are actively encouraged to be solution-focused. Partnership working is strong and, when needed, regular multi-agency meetings are held that include care leavers, their family and relevant professionals to develop safety plans to help to reduce known risk.
54. Care leavers who are parents are well supported. They are signposted to services and PAs work alongside other agencies and services as part of a family plan, accompanying care leavers to meetings and advocating for them. PAs help care leavers who are young parents to understand the child protection system and share information.
55. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly by their PAs. PAs engage effectively with other agencies, in particular probation, to provide care leavers with appropriate housing and support. This helps to give them every chance of a successful transition back to the community on their release.
56. Care leavers are well supported in their education, employment and training. While this is a priority area of focus for senior leaders, they recognise that, while numbers are gradually increasing, there is more to do to improve the numbers of care leavers accessing education, employment or training. A well-thought-out and coordinated strategy is in place to provide advice and support at an earlier stage for children in care and care leavers, with assistance from specialist employment advisers.

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

57. Since the last inspection in 2019, when services for children and families in Leicestershire County Council were judged to be 'requires improvement to be good', progress has been made across a wide range of service areas. The chief executive, director of children's services, lead member and senior leaders have worked tirelessly to transform the quality of help and protection for vulnerable children in Leicestershire. Leaders are outward looking and dynamic in their approach. They have not only sustained the elements of solid practice and leadership seen at that inspection but have continued to make progress and improvements.
58. The service benefits from a stable and highly committed leadership team, led by the director. Together they have been instrumental in delivering against the 'achieving excellence' improvement plan. Leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for further development in their services. In a challenging financial context, there is strong and stable political and corporate support for children's services, and this is helping to ensure that children's needs are prioritised by the council.
59. Strategic and operational partnerships are effective, and thresholds for services are understood across the partnerships. Relationships with key partners such as the police, schools and the judiciary are strong. These effective partnerships deliver strong multi-agency responses to children.
60. Corporate parenting in Leicestershire is sound and ambitious. The corporate parenting board receives regular performance data and reports, enabling effective scrutiny and challenge. The board maintains a strong focus on achieving positive outcomes for children in care and care leavers. The board is co-chaired by a child in care and the lead member. This helps to ensure that the role of children is prioritised at the corporate parenting meetings. This results in measurable, positive changes that benefit all children.
61. Leaders and managers at all levels lead by example and role model social work values and ethics effectively. They have successfully created a culture whereby their child-focused model of practice is welcomed by staff and partner agencies, resulting in it being consistently visible and adhered to.
62. The overall quality of children's records has improved since the last inspection. Children's records across all services are consistently written directly to the child. This places the child at the centre of practice and ensures that their voice is heard. In addition, records made in this way better help the child to understand how and why decisions were made.
63. Effective use of data helps leaders to keep track of performance and, where issues are identified, the improvements are shared across the workforce. This

includes sharing data sets on visiting patterns, timeliness and outcome measures for children. The auditing of children's records is embedded and embraced throughout the service and is providing high-quality information to managers and leaders about the quality of practice and the progress for children. Audits focus on strengths as well as the challenges that social workers and children face and, if needed, most have timebound actions to help to improve practice and children's experiences. Learning from audit activity is shared effectively with the workforce and informs the development offer to staff.

64. Senior leaders recognise that the provision of high-quality social work services relies on a well-trained, supported and motivated workforce. The well-being of staff is a priority. Leaders have successfully created a culture that is enabling social work practice to develop and thrive. An overwhelming majority of staff told inspectors that they like working in Leicestershire and value the investment and support that they have had from their managers. This investment in staff makes them want to stay. As a result, they are making a positive difference to children's experiences and progress.
65. Over the last 12 months, average caseloads have notably fallen. This helps to ensure that social workers have more capacity to deliver purposeful and well-targeted interventions to children and families. Likewise, the rate of staff turnover has fallen, as has the local authority's reliance on agency workers. Newly qualified social workers have protected workloads and are well supported during their assessed and supported year in employment.
66. The vast majority of social workers benefit from regular and purposeful supervision. Without exception, social workers said that they highly value the quality of support that they receive from managers and colleagues. The influence and decisions of managers are consistently evident. As a result, avoidable delay in progressing plans for children is only evident for a small cohort of children.
67. Leaders and managers have successfully created a work environment whereby the workforce understands the importance of building strong and long-lasting relationships with children and their families. As a result, many families achieve positive change and improved outcomes for their children.

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