

Oxfordshire County Council

Inspection of local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 16 April to 20 April 2018

Lead inspector: Donna Marriott HMI

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	Good

Children's services in Oxfordshire were judged good in all areas when they were last inspected in 2014. In 2015–16, a significant rise in demand across all areas of the service, combined with a reduction in resources as part of council-wide efficiency savings, led to a decline in the quality of some services, particularly for those children in need of help and protection. Senior leaders have taken rigorous action to respond to this deterioration. Significant additional financial investment, combined with a large-scale restructure in 2017, has led to an improved early help service, increased capacity in frontline staffing and an enhanced service for children in care. Consequently, at this inspection the overall effectiveness of children's services is judged to be good.

The large majority of children in need of help and protection in Oxfordshire receive an effective service. However, not all children are consistently well served and a small number of children do not receive a response proportionate to their needs.

Children in care and care leavers receive a good service. Despite pressures on the availability of placements, the majority of children live with carers who meet their needs effectively. An enhanced offer to children in care, including the creation of a residential edge-of-care service, is beginning to stabilise the number of children in care in Oxfordshire. The timeliness and quality of assessments of friends and family carers are not yet consistently good.

What needs to improve

- The identification of the impact of the cumulative effect of neglect on children and the timeliness of interventions in response to children's escalating needs.
- The timeliness and effectiveness of pre-proceedings work, including the early identification and response to concerns regarding unborn children.
- The timeliness and quality of friends and family assessments.
- The understanding of thresholds for early help to ensure that children do not receive unnecessary statutory intervention.

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

1. Children and families are increasingly benefiting from a range of early help services. The creation of locality community support services (LCSS) ensures the delivery of a range of well-coordinated services. The number of early help assessments completed by agencies has increased significantly from a rate of 8.8 per week in early 2017 to 22 per week in February 2018. This has had a positive impact on preventing children's needs from escalating, evidenced by the 26% reduction in contacts to children's social care.
2. When children's needs escalate, staff in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) make appropriate decisions about the level of intervention required to safeguard children. However, some work completed by the MASH could be more effectively managed in other parts of the service or by other agencies. The recent co-location of early help staff in the MASH is beginning to address this, delivering a more coordinated approach, and ensuring that children get support before their needs escalate.
3. Thresholds for children needing early help, and those in need of statutory intervention under section 17, are not well understood. Some children are receiving services from the statutory family solutions teams when their needs could be met through the provision of early help.
4. Social workers know their children well and visit them proportionately to their needs. Social workers are resourceful in the work they do with children to enable them to gain an insight into children's lives. The timeliness of assessments has improved and this is leading to earlier and more effective interventions. The large majority of assessments are of good quality. When needs are identified, services are provided and children and families do not have to wait for support until the assessment is completed.
5. When children are at risk of harm, prompt action is taken to understand their circumstances and to protect them. Strategy discussions make the right decisions about next steps, but not all discussions include all the relevant professionals. For most children subject to child protection enquiries, initial child protection conferences, and subsequent reviews, are timely. Most child protection plans are clear about the outcomes needed for children and the actions necessary to achieve them. However, contingency plans are not always evident.
6. The practice of using duty social workers to oversee a small number of children's cases, including a very small number of children on child protection plans, can lead to delay in progressing their plans. At the end of inspection, all children were allocated a named social worker.
7. The response to neglect is not timely or effective for all children. Consequently, a small minority of children remain living in unsatisfactory situations for too long. The local authority, with the local safeguarding children board (LSCB),

has recognised this and launched an online neglect portal and a range of tools to assist social workers, and partner agencies, to respond to neglect.

8. When children's circumstances do not improve, pre-proceedings are not always used early or proactively enough to manage risk. This can mean that a small minority of children experience drift and delay in achieving permanence. This is particularly evident for unborn babies, where pre-birth assessments and planning is not sufficiently timely or rigorous enough. Management oversight of pre-proceedings arrangements needs to improve to ensure that plans for children are progressed swiftly in response to escalating concerns. Senior managers had already taken action to strengthen this critical work prior to the inspection.
9. Strong partnership working ensures an effective response to children at risk of sexual exploitation. The local authority and partners are alert and responsive to risks relating to exploitation in its widest sense. The multi-agency 'Kingfisher' team, incorporating police, social workers, and health and education staff, enables good intelligence sharing, planning and intervention to tackle exploitation. Risks are rigorously managed and effective action taken in response to concerns.
10. The response to children who go missing from home or care is robust. A dedicated multi-agency missing panel tracks and cross-references all children missing from home, care and education. Return home interviews are timely, focused and detailed. Information derived from interviews is used effectively to analyse patterns and trends. The help provided is effectively reducing the risk and number of missing episodes for children.

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

11. Once the decision is made for children to become looked after, plans are timely and carefully overseen by managers. Imaginatively designed services, such as the residential edge-of-care service, provide thorough assessments and comprehensive support, helping children to remain in the care of their families. The use of residential shared care, respite breaks and restorative family meetings has been effective in stabilising a substantial increase in the number of adolescents who have entered care over the last four years.
12. Social workers build meaningful and important relationships with children in care through their regular visits. Direct work with children is often imaginative and helps social workers to understand children's experiences. The quality of this work is not always reflected in children's case records.
13. Children live in safe and stable arrangements with carers who promote their interests and provide opportunities for new activities. This enables children to enjoy life, in addition to promoting their regular school attendance and educational attainment.

14. A very small minority of children who have been in care for longer periods wait too long for life-story work to start to help them better understand their family history and why they came into care.
15. The assessment of suitable family and friends arrangements for children entering care requires improvement. Some assessments take too long to complete and some are of a poor quality. As a result, a small number of these placements have become unregulated. When this occurs, it means that the local authority is less able to assure itself that children are supported or safeguarded effectively.
16. When children first enter care, there is a strong focus on quickly finding the right permanent placement through effective matching and parallel planning. A significant proportion of children who live outside the county receive careful and determined multi-agency efforts to secure essential educational, health and therapeutic support.
17. A large increase in the numbers of older children entering care over recent years has presented challenges in providing sufficient and suitable placements. Extensive work has taken place to address this, including a comprehensive needs analysis. The large majority of older children live in accommodation that meets their needs well. Nevertheless, challenges remain, and inspectors saw a very small number of 17-year-olds with very complex and challenging needs, who, as a result of placement breakdown, were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Although these children were receiving support from the edge-of-care service, such arrangements are unsuitable.
18. Children entering care have their health needs promptly assessed, reviewed and promoted, including their emotional and mental well-being needs. Children benefit from prompt access to a dedicated service that supports them and their carers to manage established or emerging mental health and emotional difficulties. A significant number of unaccompanied children entering the country are well supported from the outset. Effective, holistic multi-agency efforts meet their needs for suitable accommodation, health, education, training and therapeutic support.
19. Children in care typically make better progress in their educational attainment than their counterparts nationally. Personal education plans (PEPs) have a clear focus on raising achievement. Increased challenge from the virtual school has improved the standard of PEPs and raised the profile, training, partnership and support of work in schools with children in care.
20. Children's care plans comprehensively document children's needs, but are not always rigorous enough in setting out clear, specific action and timescales for meeting them. Independent reviewing officers regularly review children's care plans and evaluate their progress between formal reviews.

21. Social workers and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to achieving permanence for children. A wide range of permanence options are consistently pursued, dependent on children's specific needs, including supporting children to remain in their extended family or network, special guardianship arrangements, long-term fostering and adoption.
22. Since December 2017, the local authority has hosted the Regional Adoption Agency (*Adopt Thames Valley*). The local authority is aspirational in seeking to achieve adoption where this is the right option for the child. Social workers and managers demonstrate a 'never give up' attitude, which has secured permanence for some children who have been difficult to place. Despite a decline in the number of children achieving permanence through adoption and the timeliness of matching, adoption performance remains good compared to statistical neighbours. Adopters are overwhelmingly positive about their experience and particularly value the sensitivity and professionalism of the social work practice in Oxfordshire. There is a wide range of post-adoption support and the local authority makes good use of the adoption support fund.
23. Children in care who could safely return home are carefully identified through edge-of-care services and a developing reunification project. These effective approaches include diligent assessments and plans to test the suitability and sustainability of children returning to their homes, resulting in a low rate of children subsequently returning to local authority care.
24. Care leavers benefit from developing meaningful relationships with personal advisers, who are conscientious and helpful advocates for children. There is a real sense of personal advisers being that 'one person who believes' in the young person. Personal advisers work hard to keep in touch with the care leavers they support, with contact tailored to individual need.
25. Effective work takes place to ensure that care leavers have the help they need to make successful transitions to independence. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation, including those who 'stay put' with their foster carers. Accommodation options are carefully considered and creative planning and tenacity ensures that young people live in the most appropriate placement. Pathway plans reflect care leavers' histories and day-to-day experiences, but would be strengthened if actions needed and timescales for delivery were clearer.
26. The percentage of care leavers in education, employment and training is below that of those nationally. However, this is an improving picture, with more care leavers accessing opportunities. Support provided by the virtual school has been successful in increasing the proportion of older care leavers engaging with education, employment and training.

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

27. The director of children's services (DCS) and her determined senior leadership team have worked resolutely to re-build the service. Increased capacity has reduced caseloads and pressure on frontline teams. Managers now actively monitor performance and caseloads through recently established demand management clinics. The local authority has taken action to address the long-standing issues it has experienced with performance reporting and has commissioned a new children's recording system. However, some issues with the quality and accuracy of performance information remain.
28. The local authority has rightly focused attention on establishing a strong, stable workforce, creating an environment for social work practice to flourish. As a result, workforce stability is good, with a relatively low turnover rate (14%) and limited use of temporary staff. Social workers are positive about working for Oxfordshire. Leaders and managers are visible and available. Supervision and management oversight are evident in children's case recording. Social workers receive regular supervision, but recording of this is not always reflective or timely.
29. The outward-facing leadership team both challenge themselves and seek challenge from across the sector, engaging in external consultancy and independent reviews. Demand and trend analysis has provided a solid basis from which to shape the service, ensuring it is responsive to Oxfordshire's specific needs.
30. A joint targeted inspection in 2016 identified issues with the application of thresholds by partner agencies and shortfalls in capacity. Leaders responded to those findings, increasing frontline staffing in the MASH and introducing an early help triage system. Effective action has been taken by the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board to strengthen partners' understanding of thresholds. Consequently, there has been a reduction in the number of inappropriate contacts made to the MASH. The MASH now provides an effective response to children referred into the service.
31. In the main, children requiring help and protection receive a good service. However, despite increased capacity and improved managerial oversight, a small number of children experience delay in response to their escalating needs.
32. Political and operational leaders ensure that they have an understanding of the service through engagement in bi-annual practice weeks, which involve visits to offices, observing practice and gaining feedback from staff. Well-embedded quality assurance processes include monthly and quarterly audit activity and provide senior leaders with insight into areas of potential weakness. However, not all audits reviewed by inspectors identified key shortfalls in practice. There

is currently no moderation process in place to test the accuracy of case file audits, and this dilutes the effectiveness of the quality assurance function.

33. Corporate parenting is strong, led by an active corporate parenting panel. Political leaders demonstrate commitment to children, undertaking visits to children's homes and meeting frontline staff to gain an understanding of children's experiences. In response to insufficient local placements for children, senior leaders have increased investment to expand the range of local placements available for children. The recruitment of new foster carers and the building of new children's homes is helping children to live closer to their families and communities.
34. Children in care are influential in shaping the service through the active and prominent Children in Care Council. The Oxfordshire Care Leaver's Association, a social enterprise initiative run by care leavers, is helping to design services and to coach and mentor children in care.



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2018