

# Hertfordshire

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 15 October 2018 to 19 October 2018**

**Lead inspector: Nigel Parkes**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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 and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Senior leaders are restlessly ambitious for the children, young people and families who depend on them for help and protection, care and support. With a strong track record and a tangible commitment to continuous improvement, children's social care services continue to be well led, well managed and well run.

Recommendations made at the time of the last inspection have been successfully addressed. With adult specialist workers embedded in family safeguarding teams, the local authority's approach to 'Think Family' is mature and well developed. The help and protection that most children receive has improved since the last inspection and is now good.

Hertfordshire is a good corporate parent. By their actions, time and again, managers, staff and elected members demonstrate that the children and young people in their care really matter. Children in care continue to receive a good service, and the service that care leavers receive is outstanding. However, placement stability is still an issue and sufficiency continues to be a challenge.

The virtual school is a force for good, as evidenced by an improving pattern in the attainment and progress of children in care.

Senior leaders have taken on board, and are already acting on, key messages from this inspection. Although proud of their achievements, and increasingly involved in supporting other authorities in the region, senior leaders remain grounded in a culture of openness, transparency and rigorous self-scrutiny. They recognise that their journey of improvement is not finished and that there is further work to do.

## **What needs to improve**

- Achieving the right balance between support and challenge with all parents.
- Consistently applying thresholds with adolescents.
- Placement stability and the disproportionate number of children in care who are living outside of the local authority's boundaries.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good**

1. Early help services are well developed. The focus is on making sure that families receive an appropriate level of help and support as soon as issues and concerns are first identified. Located at the 'front door', the Families First hub provides an effective route into early help. Local multi-agency triage panels are effective in mobilising packages of support. The introduction of an online early help database is making it easier for partners to share information and coordinate their activities. This has led to an improvement in the quality of assessments. In most cases, when families start to struggle, they receive a timely response.
2. Early help is making a real difference to children's and families' lives. It is helping to keep children and young people safe and has contributed to a reduction in the volume of referrals to children's social care. Leaders have re-aligned children's centres with health visiting and school nursing services. Intensive family support is available for those who need it. Targeted youth support services offer a range of intensive and effective interventions. A very large majority of parents and children who responded to a recent survey that the local authority had conducted reported that 'things have improved' as a result of the help they received.
3. In most cases, when risks and/or needs increase, cases are stepped up promptly to children's social care. The customer services centre works well to make sure that children and young people get the right level of help and support. In the vast majority of cases, contacts are filtered and screened appropriately under the watchful eye of a social work qualified manager.
4. Partners generally have a good understanding of thresholds and referral pathways. The recent introduction of a consultation hub for other professionals, including, for example, health visitors, general practitioners and head teachers, provides an effective service and has been very well received. The standard of referrals from partners agencies is generally good. This helps to avoid unnecessary delay.
5. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is well managed. It provides an effective and timely response to contacts and referrals. Risks are rigorously assessed and reviewed at regular intervals. Information is well shared, history is carefully considered, and background checks are completed promptly and to a good standard. There is good evidence of professional curiosity. Parental consent is only dispensed with when it is in the child's best interests to do this. Management oversight and case direction are clear and well recorded. Contacts and referrals are processed in a timely way which means that most children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response.

6. Social workers and police officers work well together to protect children who are at immediate risk. The joint child protection investigation team provides an effective countywide service. Strategy discussions are timely and make good use of information from partner agencies. Child protection enquiries are thorough; they are child centred and consider all the children in the household. Children and young people are seen, and spoken to, alone. Follow-up strategy discussions routinely review the action taken and agree the next steps. Initial child protection conferences are timely and effective. This helps to ensure that children are properly protected.
7. Social workers are quick to make contact with children and families who are eligible for an assessment. They work hard to try to engage fathers, including those who are not part of the immediate household, often with considerable success. Inspectors saw ample evidence of purposeful direct work with children and young people. Needs and risks are clearly identified. So too are strengths and protective factors. Analysis is used well to inform and shape child in need and child protection plans. The vast majority of assessments are timely and completed within a reasonable timescale, in line with the level of needs and risks. In any event, children and families do not have to wait for assessments to be completed before help, support and/or protection are provided.
8. Most plans are reasonably specific, realistic and measurable some more so than others. Occasionally, plans are too lengthy, and some are not as measurable as they could or should be. However, child in need, and core group, meetings take place at regular intervals, are well attended and are clearly focused on the experiences and progress of children and young people. Assessments and plans are regularly reviewed and updated in response to changing circumstances. This helps to ensure that interventions are relevant and purposeful and that they are effective in delivering better outcomes for children, young people and families.
9. The quality of partnership working, particularly in the multi-disciplinary family safeguarding teams, is a real strength. The presence in these teams of adult workers with a range of specialist skills, knowledge and experience provides plenty of opportunities for joint working. It also encourages and facilitates creative solutions to long-standing and/or deeply entrenched problems, including those associated with parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and/or domestic violence. Inspectors saw repeated examples of parents being motivated to change their risky, abusive or neglectful behaviour. This is helping to make children and young people happier, healthier and safer by improving outcomes and reducing risks.
10. However, in a small number of cases, social workers and their managers had not achieved the right balance between children's and adults' needs and between support and challenge. Senior leaders recognise, as their own audits have told them, that on occasions, the collective commitment to engage, motivate and work with families has been accompanied by a degree of naivety

and/or over-optimism. While it would be wrong to overstate the case, it is also clear that in a very small number of cases, including some where there was evidence of chronic neglect, this has contributed to drift and delay. Inspectors also found that, on occasions, a different risk threshold is applied to vulnerable adolescents.

11. Generally, good and effective use is made of the Public Law Outline. Legal planning meetings, chaired by service managers, are convened promptly in response to increasing concerns and often on the basis of recommendations agreed at children protection conferences. Letters before proceedings clearly spell out what needs to change and why. Progress is carefully monitored, although not always recorded on case files. However, staffing pressures in the west of the county over the course of the last year have, on occasions, contributed to delays in assessments being completed.
12. Social workers receive regular and effective supervision. In most cases, there is clear and well-recorded evidence of robust management oversight, including case direction, at every point in the child's journey. Frontline managers generally provide effective critical challenge, encouraging social workers to reflect on the level of risk, and routinely reviewing the progress of individual cases with them. Group supervision in the family safeguarding teams is, by its very nature, reflective. Inspectors saw good examples of specialist adult workers who are embedded in the family safeguarding teams using their expertise in domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health to challenge children's social work colleagues about the impact on children of parents' risky behaviour. This strengthens practice.
13. However, it is also apparent that in a very small number of cases, managers have failed to provide the right level of challenge. The local authority's approach to family safeguarding involves motivating families to change behaviours that place their children at risk, while avoiding the need for over-intrusive interventions in order to keep families together safely. It appears that, on occasions, some managers and social workers may have taken this shift in emphasis too far, and, by focusing on the minimum necessary intervention, have failed to get the right balance. This is potentially damaging for children and young people. Recognising the potential danger in this approach, senior leaders are taking appropriate action to strengthen existing checks and balances to make sure that risks are always addressed effectively.
14. The local authority and its partners are strong on domestic violence. There is a no-nonsense approach, as evidenced by the children's social care worker based in the domestic abuse investigation and safeguarding unit (DAISU), who provides a valuable triage function and the rigorous response to domestic violence notifications in the MASH. Social workers and domestic violence specialists work well together to engage the perpetrators of domestic violence by, for example, making themselves available to see fathers at evenings and weekends. The emphasis is on breaking the cycle of violence by holding men to account for their own actions rather than making female victims solely

responsible for protecting themselves and their children. The focus throughout is always on the impact of domestic violence on children and young people.

15. A more consistently robust response means that children and young people who go missing from home or care are better safeguarded and protected. They are consistently offered timely return home interviews (RHI) which carefully explore push and pull factors, consider the risks associated with others in the young person's network and identify actions needed to reduce risk. The information and intelligence gathered is shared well with other professionals to ensure that emerging patterns are identified and addressed. Effective tracking arrangements help to ensure that RHIs and risk assessments are timely and that senior leaders have a clear oversight of this area of work.
16. The local authority has established strong and effective arrangements to identify and support those children who are missing from education (CME) and those who are being electively home educated (EHE) and at risk. Co-location of teams enables frequent, formal and informal discussion of cases involving Traveller children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, CME, EHE and children whose attendance is causing concern.
17. However, while 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are given shelter and support, the needs of the most vulnerable are not always addressed appropriately. This indicates that, on occasions, a different risk threshold is being applied to vulnerable adolescents. Senior leaders are taking immediate and appropriate action to address this issue.
18. The help, protection, support and care that disabled children receive has improved significantly since the last inspection as a result of the creation of the 0–25 Together Service. This has helped to ensure that disabled children and their families receive the help and support they need, while retaining the ability to respond swiftly and effectively to safeguarding and child protection issues as and when they arise.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

19. Most children who come into care do so because it is not possible for them to remain safely at home. Most are living in placements that meet their needs, and they are making good progress.
20. However, the number of children who come into care in an emergency, with all the upset and distress that this can cause, is too high. A significant proportion of the children who came into care last year as a result of police protection were already known to children's social care. Based on an audit that they had commissioned, senior managers concluded that in a small number of cases the

emergency admission was partly the result of over-optimism and/or the result of a failure to take decisive action in the face of continuing or escalating risks.

21. Services for children and young people who are on the edge of care are effective. Staff make good use of targeted short breaks for adolescents, skilfully reducing pressures where there is the real potential for family breakdown. Where there has already been a breakdown resulting in children being accommodated under s20, a six-week intensive residential programme helps to repair fractured relationships, keep families together and make it possible for children to return home safely.
22. There is a strong focus on achieving permanence for children and young people in care, including by re-uniting them with their birth families if it is safe to do so. The local authority uses a range of tools to track the experience and progress of children in care. There is no evidence of significant drift or delay.
23. Social workers know well the children and young people they work with. They have a full understanding of their needs and regularly review and update children's assessments. Social workers see children frequently, including those placed out of area and at a distance from Hertfordshire. They also keep in touch with children between visits. In this way, social workers are able to develop meaningful relationships with children and young people.
24. Social workers listen to, and act on, children's wishes and feelings and are skilful and persistent in trying to make sure that children's needs are met. As evidence of its commitment to corporate parenting, the local authority encourages social workers to participate in events and activities organised by the children in care council that their children are involved in, including, for example, residential weekends. For children who have been let down by adults in the past, it is difficult to underestimate the importance of this.
25. Most care plans are reasonably clear, specific and outcome focused. Sports and leisure activities are encouraged and supported. Contact arrangements with parents, brothers and sisters and members of their extended families are well planned and well managed.
26. Independent reviewing officers provide a good level of critical challenge. They effectively champion children's rights, entitlements, wishes and feelings by holding others to account and chasing progress against decisions taken and action agreed. They are not afraid to use the formal escalation process when it is appropriate and necessary to do so. Minutes of children's looked after reviews are clear, comprehensive and reflect an appropriate level of attention to detail. Children and young people are actively encouraged and supported to contribute to, and participate in, their reviews. Many do. Good use is made of independent advocates where necessary.
27. In most cases, children's health and education needs are clearly and comprehensively addressed.



28. Over the past two years, there has been an improving pattern in attainment and progress of children in care. This is due to the intense scrutiny by the virtual school of each pupil, their needs and vulnerabilities, as well as strong and effective evaluation of electronic personal education plans (ePEPs). The ePEP system is well embedded in practice, enabling the virtual school to effectively monitor and steer the progress of children in care. The most effective PEPs are specific about what pupils have achieved and they provide strong evidence for the impact of targeted interventions. Targets are sharply focused on next steps in order to achieve the best outcomes.
29. School colleagues talk very positively about the radical overhaul of the virtual school 18 months ago, and the shift towards a much sharper focus on improvement and challenge. With very few permanent exclusions and a reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions, the virtual school's relentless focus on impact means that there is an improving pattern in the progress and attainment of children in care.
30. Robust arrangements are in place to safeguard and protect children who go missing from home or care, or who are at risk of being criminally or sexually exploited. Thorough risk assessments are used well to help shape and inform detailed multi-agency risk management plans. The monthly sexual exploitation and runaway children (SEARCH) panel is an effective forum for sharing intelligence and determining how best to protect those who are at the highest level of risk. Inspectors saw some very good examples of specialist support for young people at risk of gang affiliation or county lines exploitation making them safer, reducing their reliance on drugs and/or helping them back into education.
31. The children in care council (CHICC) is strong, active and influential. Its members meet once a year with the full council and are actively encouraged to 'tell it how it is'. As well as making a significant contribution to the development and roll-out of the 'Outcome Bees' framework, CHICC members are routinely involved in the selection and recruitment of staff. They also helped to select and then test out the Mind of My Own (MOMO) app, giving children and young people another way to provide feedback of their experiences.
32. Foster carers are well prepared, well supported and well supervised. Although recruitment is still a challenge, as it is nationally, the fostering service is now back on track to meet its recruitment targets. Assessments are thorough. New foster carers, including kinship carers, are properly prepared for their roles. This helps to reduce the likelihood of placement breakdown. Existing foster carers have access to a wide range of training and feel very well supported. They welcome the local authority's concerted efforts to bolster the support available to them, and to the children in their care, through a number of initiatives. These include the development of an extended family model which provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, as well as social activities. The initiatives also include a more structured approach to

making sure that carers have the skills, knowledge and clinical support that they need to be able to care for children and young people who have experienced trauma and disruption in their young lives. These are further examples of the local authority's commitment to strengthen the support available to foster carers, including kinship carers, and improve the experience and progress of children.

33. However, the proportion of children in care who are living outside of the local authority's boundaries has increased and short-term placement stability continues to be a challenge. According to the local authority's own figures, over half of children in care have experienced at least one move in the last 12 months, and a significant minority have had three or more moves. Senior leaders are acutely aware of this and of the potentially damaging and disruptive impact on the lives of children and young people. Appropriate action is being taken to address this issue, but progress is slow.
34. Although the overall number of children who leave care through adoption has fallen, the adoption service continues to provide a good service. Post-adoption support is considered at an early stage and is provided at a level that meets the needs of each of the children and families. The service's recruitment strategy is delivering a steady flow of prospective adopters. Recruitment and selection processes are timely, rigorous and robust. Assessments are thorough and of a good quality. Adoption placement disruptions are a rare occurrence.
35. The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers. Personal advisers are patient, persistent and tenacious, frequently going the extra mile and demonstrating by their actions that they really care. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation. They all have pathway plans, most of which are of a good standard, although senior leaders recognise that the pathway planning template itself is in need of improvement.
36. The proportion of care leavers in meaningful education, employment and training continues to improve, not least because of what one personal adviser described as the local authority's 'we don't let go of them until they let go of us and, even then, we don't let go of them' attitude. The post-16 team is proactive and highly effective in supporting care leavers to maintain their post-16 education.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Outstanding**

37. Senior leaders are conscientious in holding each other to account. Knowing that, as the chief executive likes to say, 'bad news doesn't get better by not talking about it', managers are encouraged to 'tell it how it is'. There are no secrets and no attempts to shy away from recurrent challenges, like, for example, short-term placement stability or the progress and achievement in

education of children in care. In fact, senior leaders' approach is one of openness and transparency. At an operational level, this organisational culture is helping to create an environment in which social work is flourishing.

38. Senior leaders have their fingers on the pulse. The chief executive and the executive member for children, young people and families regularly meet separately and together, formally and informally, with the director of children's services. Governance arrangements are robust. Elected members provide effective scrutiny. The practice and performance of children's social care services are closely monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board, which keeps a watchful eye on the experience and progress of children and young people.
39. The local authority's self-evaluation is open, honest, appropriately self-critical and essentially accurate. Senior leaders have a good understanding of what is happening at the frontline. With one exception, this inspection told them very little that they did not already know about themselves, their staff or their services. Senior leaders embraced the inspection as an opportunity for reflection and learning. They have taken immediate action to address inconsistencies and anomalies that inspectors observed in the experiences of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
40. While the local authority rightly prides itself on having a settled, stable and very capable group of senior leaders, there is no sense of complacency. Quite the opposite. Senior leaders listen to and act on what children, young people and families tell them. They are restlessly ambitious for the children, young people and families who depend on them for help and protection, care and support. Allied to the senior leaders' imagination, creativity and willingness to innovate, this ambition has helped to create an environment in which continuous improvement is the norm rather than the exception. This accounts for the local authority's impressive track record of successfully attracting additional funding. Income provided through the children's social care innovation programme has, for example, been well used by the local authority to develop its approach to early help and to radically transform the way in which family safeguarding services are delivered.
41. Senior leaders have developed strong and effective strategic and operational partnerships across a range of agencies and organisations. These include the 10 district and borough councils and two clinical commissioning groups that populate the complex local geopolitical landscape. Multi-disciplinary working is flourishing in Hertfordshire. The impact of this is evident at so many levels, including the timely completion of health and dental checks for children in care, the high percentage of care leavers in education, employment or training and the number and proportion of children, and their families, who are being safely and successfully supported as children in need.
42. Hertfordshire is a good corporate parent. Using the Outcome Bees framework, developed in conjunction with the CHICC, the corporate parenting panel

systematically reviews the experiences and progress of children and young people across each of the six domains (Bee Happy, Bee Healthy, Bee Safe, Bee Resilient, Bee Ambitious, Bee Independent). Pledge commitments are measured in actions and outcomes rather than words or promises. Panel meeting minutes provide a clear sense of purpose and focus, as well as an appropriate level of critical challenge and attention to detail.

43. The local authority uses top quality performance management information to manage the business of children's social care in a purposeful, professional and child-centred way. Sophisticated use of infographics means that the information presented is easy to understand and digest. An overarching performance management report includes 'moment in time', 'trend' and 'comparative' data with succinct analysis, where applicable. This is supported by a range of other reports that provide detailed information about virtually all aspects of practice and performance. This includes, for example, how many different social workers individual children and young people have had in the last 12 months. The local authority's performance across a range of key indicators is consistently in the top quartile.
44. Senior leaders make astute use of hard data and soft intelligence to target their audit activity to best effect. They systematically use case management audits, themed audits and dip samples to focus on issues, concerns and/or emerging trends to probe and test the quality of practice. The children's social care board, which oversees and authorises an annual programme of themed audits, receives quarterly reports on the lessons learned. This helps to ensure that senior leaders are in touch with what is happening at the frontline and means that they can, and do, take appropriate remedial action as required.
45. However, senior leaders recognise that while audit judgements are generally accurate, the quality of the audits themselves varies and they do not always provide the right level of critical challenge. The local authority is currently in the process of radically re-shaping and upgrading its approach to quality assurance.
46. Senior leaders have invested wisely in their workforce. The local authority's approach to recruitment and retention has helped to deliver a settled and stable workforce. The level of staff turnover has reduced significantly, as has the local authority's reliance on agency staff. Comparatively low caseloads mean that social workers have the time and space to build meaningful relationships, and do purposeful work, with children and families.
47. Newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) are well supported and have protected caseloads throughout their assisted and supported year in employment. NQSWS talk very positively about the intensive training, support and supervision provided by Hertfordshire's social work academy, including opportunities to shadow experienced social workers. Other members of staff are equally enthusiastic about the level and quality of training and development opportunities available to them. Recognising that succession planning is

critically important, the local authority has made a significant investment in its current and future leaders. This helps to maintain stability and ensure continuity.



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 [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

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](http://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](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This publication is available at [www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted](http://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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2018