

Cheshire East Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 18 November 2019 to 29 November 2019

Lead inspector: Shabana Abasi
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.	Requires improvement to be 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	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the single inspection framework (SIF) inspection in 2015, and the focused visit in October 2018, the local authority has made significant progress in some service areas. Arrangements in the integrated front door have been strengthened, ensuring that referrals about children for whom there are safeguarding concerns are almost always dealt with quickly and appropriately. The scale and effectiveness of the early help services has improved, enabling more children and families to access timely and appropriate support. An 'edge of care' team works intensively with families to ensure that children only come into care when they need to, and that children at risk of exploitation receive a robust service. The voice of the child is a strength. Social workers are creative in their direct work with children.

However, improvement is needed in other services to ensure that children receive a consistently good service. While initial concerns are dealt with effectively and families receive a service at the right level of intervention, the subsequent interventions are not consistently good. Some vulnerable children's situations are not improving quickly enough. Management oversight and challenge are not fully embedded in all service areas, and the quality of social work practice is too

inconsistent. There are avoidable delays in determining and implementing plans for some children, and not all vulnerabilities are fully recognised and addressed. Some children wait too long to enter care and experience a sense of permanence.

Children experiencing chronic long-term neglect, children who are privately fostered, and homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are not always receiving appropriate help. Care leavers needing emergency accommodation are not always placed in accommodation where they feel safe and have their needs met. Senior leaders and managers were not fully aware of some of these shortfalls until the inspection. Efforts to improve foster carer recruitment have not had sufficient impact and some foster carers feel poorly supported.

What needs to improve

- The quality, consistency and analysis of assessments, and the child focus of plans.
- Management oversight of cases in pre-proceedings, to avoid drift and delay for children.
- The response to children in private fostering arrangements, children who are homeless aged 16 and 17 years old, and care leavers who need emergency accommodation.
- The quality and consistency of support and engagement with foster carers.
- Consistent management oversight and supervision in the organisation to ensure that consistent, good-quality social work practice is in place.

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

1. Children and families benefit from a comprehensive and well-developed early help offer. The early help brokerage service based in the integrated front door is effective at identifying support for children and families at the right level of intervention. The quality of help and support provided builds families' resilience and improves the experiences of children.
2. When needs or risks increase, cases are stepped up appropriately from early help to children's social care. This escalation is timely and ensures that children receive more specialist support when needed. When professionals from partner agencies have concerns about children, they make appropriate contacts to children's social care.
3. The arrangements in the integrated front door are well embedded, and thresholds are consistently applied. Most contacts are dealt with effectively, but, for some, the response is not timely enough. Experienced social workers, supported by effective and prompt information-sharing by partner agencies, ensure that safeguarding concerns are responded to well. Children at immediate risk of significant harm are identified swiftly, and action is taken to safeguard and protect them. Work completed out of hours is picked up in a timely way by the day services. Parental consent issues are well understood, but are not always well recorded.
4. Where children and families may be at risk because of domestic abuse, the Cheshire East domestic abuse hub provides an effective 24-hour, seven-days-a-

week response, underpinned by access to a wealth of intervention and support services. This has led to a decrease in families needing to be referred to MARAC.

5. Most strategy meetings are timely, and information-sharing from relevant partners is considered carefully. This leads to appropriate decisions and actions to protect children. Child protection investigations are timely, thorough, demonstrate clear information-sharing and focus on risk. Designated officer arrangements ensure that concerns and allegations regarding staff and volunteers working with children are managed effectively.
6. Social workers are making good use of the local authority's preferred model of social work to identify risks and protective factors. However, assessments are not of a consistent quality. While the majority are detailed and identify risk, in some cases this is not rigorously analysed, and the impact on the child is not fully considered. This lack of sharpness in assessments results in child in need and child protection plans that lack specificity. Plans are not always clear about the outcome desired or timescales for their completion, and some plans are overly focused on adult need. This means that actions to address risk and improve children's welfare are not always as effective as they should be.
7. Multi-agency reviews take place regularly for children subject to child in need and child protection processes. They are well attended by partners, who collaborate effectively to evaluate progress.
8. When children in need, including those in need of protection, are identified as being at increased need or risk, they are appropriately stepped up to higher levels of intervention. However, in some cases, there is a delay in reaching this decision due to social workers and managers over-estimating parents' capacity to change. In some instances, social workers' and managers' decisions to step down cases are based on an over-optimism regarding parental change that is informed by perceptions of improved compliance, rather than any significant or sustained change for the child.
9. Pre-proceedings work to try to achieve positive change for children and to avoid the need for them to come into care is not consistently timely. Some children's cases are managed within public law outline processes for too long without sufficient management oversight and review to decide whether alternative action needs to be taken to protect them. While no children were found to be at immediate risk, a small number of children were left in neglectful situations for too long.
10. Children are seen regularly, and social workers speak knowledgeably about their children and understand them very well. Social workers are creative in their direct work with children, using pictures and play to develop meaningful relationships to understand their world.

11. Management oversight of frontline practice is not consistently effective. It does not always demonstrate that it is driving plans to ensure that actions are timely and that children's life experiences improve within a timescale that is right for them. While most social workers receive regular supervision, this is not always sufficiently analytical or reflective.
12. The quality of help and protection offered to children by the disabled children's team is a strength. Social workers use a wide variety of communication methods to ensure that children's needs inform assessments. This leads to strong planning and bespoke packages of support for children and families.
13. The response to vulnerable children is not consistent for all groups of children. When young people present as homeless, there is not a sufficiently robust response to ensure that their needs are fully identified, that they are appropriately supported, or that they are made aware of their right to become looked after. Consequently, a small number of young people remain in situations of vulnerability. The response to children privately fostered is variable. Their needs are not always thoroughly assessed, and a lack of planning does not ensure that their need for permanence is addressed promptly or that they are appropriately safeguarded and supported.
14. Children at home or in care who go missing, or who are at risk of exploitation, receive robust, well-coordinated multi-agency responses that reduce risks and help protect them. The weekly missing from home and exploitation meeting is used to coordinate effective intelligence sharing, which enables swift identification of young people at risk of exploitation. When children go missing, return home interviews offered by a commissioned service are detailed and carefully consider push and pull factors. The information gathered is used effectively to inform safety planning.
15. There are well-embedded systems for tracking, assessing and safeguarding children missing education and those electively home educated. The local authority has plans to further develop relationships with parents within the electively home educated community. The Cornerstone behaviour provision is an effective early intervention model which has resulted in no primary exclusions.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good.

16. When there are immediate safeguarding concerns or risks, the local authority makes good use of its legal powers to safeguard and protect children. However, when risks are chronic rather than acute, the identification of risk and decisions to take children into care are sometimes too slow. This means that a few children remain in harmful

situations longer than they should and can enter care in an unplanned manner.

17. Where children are placed with parents under a care order, assessments and support plans are appropriate. However, some children remain on care orders at home for too long. Delays in discharging care orders mean that children are subject to statutory involvement longer than they need to be. The local authority is addressing this by tracking all children subject to care orders at home to support appropriate and timely discharge applications to court.
18. Children and families benefit from a responsive and intensive edge of care service, provided by the @act team. The team works creatively and flexibly in building on strengths to support families to improve outcomes for children, reduce risks and enable families to remain together. Where children are unable to remain in the care of their parents, family network meetings are held promptly to identify potential carers. Children who are unable to return to their birth families are supported to live with kinship carers or connected persons, including under Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs).
19. Children in care are seen regularly and alone by their social workers. Social workers can clearly articulate children's needs, identify their risks and vulnerabilities and describe their personalities. Children are supported by purposeful and creative direct work, which informs assessments and plans.
20. The quality of assessments and care plans is not yet consistently good. Assessments are not routinely updated to reflect changes in children's circumstances, and needs are not fully informing care planning. Written plans are not always sufficiently specific in identifying the child's needs and the support necessary. However, when spoken to, social workers are better able to articulate the focus of the support.
21. Children are well supported to make meaningful contribution to their reviews; advocacy and the need for independent visitors is considered within the reviews. Reviews are child focused and well attended and they measure the progress of children's plans. However, challenge by the independent reviewing officers (IROs) is not consistently effective. It does not always provide the level of critical evaluation required to progress children's cases with clarity and pace.
22. Consideration is routinely given to permanence planning from an early stage. However, in some cases this is not facilitated within timescales that are right for the child. Some children's cases are not presented to court at the earliest opportunity. For some children, proceedings are taking too long to be completed, because of the local authority either not complying

with court directions or with court-directed independent expert reports. Consequently, permanence is not achieved quickly enough for some children.

23. The local authority is a member of Adoption Counts, the regional adoption agency, and is being well served by these arrangements. It is benefiting from a steady increase in the number of approved adopters, which is supporting effective and timely family finding and matching. For most children whose plan is adoption, permanence is achieved in a timely manner. Decision-making for adoption is thorough and well documented. Post-adoption support for children is strong, and effective use is made of the adoption support fund to identify packages of support for children's individual needs. Most child permanence reports and life-story work are of a good standard.
24. Most children are living in placements that are meeting their needs and helping them to make good progress, including those children placed out of area and in specialist provision. When placements become fragile, stability meetings are held promptly to identify what further support and intervention is needed for children and their carers. Young people are supported to stay with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthdays when this meets their needs and wishes.
25. Social workers and carers are attuned to children's physical and emotional health and well-being. Children can access therapeutic support via CAMHS or other specialist providers. There are good multi-agency services to respond to child exploitation and children who go missing. Transgender children are very well supported to ensure their physical and emotional needs are met.
26. Sufficiency of in-house foster carers is a known service challenge. The number of approved fostering households has reduced and recent attempts to improve recruitment has not had the impact the local authority had hoped for. The quality of foster carer assessment is good. The IRO for fostering is providing an effective level of challenge to ensure that carers continue to meet the fostering standards. Foster carers reported that they have access to a range of good training, which supports them in caring for the children in their care.
27. A significant group of foster carers have raised a series of concerns over a period of time and during the inspection about the support they receive from the local authority. Inspectors found that foster carers were not always well supported and that, in some cases, working relationships were at risk of breaking down. Senior leaders are aware of the issues, and a much needed independent review of the fostering service planned prior to the inspection is underway.

28. The virtual school provides strong leadership, which is leading to improving outcomes for most children. The virtual school's focus on the attendance of children in care has led to improvements in both primary and secondary. The virtual school has an accurate understanding of the work needed to ensure that children's outcomes at key stages 2 and 4 are improved. Personal education plans are variable, and some lack specific targets for improvement, and, therefore, do not effectively support educational planning.
29. Care leavers are supported by personal advisers (PAs) who know them well and see them regularly, but the frequency of visits is not tailored to individual needs. Transitions between teams are sensitively managed. All care leavers have up-to-date pathway plans which are reviewed regularly. However, the involvement of care leavers in the development of their plans is inconsistent. Young people are supported to learn and practise independence skills. Young people's health, including mental health and emotional well-being needs, is supported effectively through a variety of health professionals, universal and specialist commissioned services. Care leavers do not routinely receive copies of their health histories. PAs and the specialist NEET worker support young people to access education, employment and training. The number of young people aged 17 to 18 in education, employment and training is in line with national figures. For those aged 19 to 21, the figure is better than the national average.
30. The local authority has strengthened its accommodation offer for care leavers. Young people who wish to move to independence benefit from attendance at the Ignition panel, and they have the opportunity to discuss their individual accommodation needs. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. However, a very small but significant cohort of the most vulnerable care leavers could be exposed to risks when placed in the local authority's chosen temporary accommodation. Care leavers who spoke with inspectors had poor experiences of being placed in emergency accommodation and described not feeling safe. Senior leaders already have credible plans to address the issues raised.
31. Support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is effective. Immediate action is taken to safeguard and protect them. Practice with these young people shows good cultural awareness in finding suitable accommodation and wider support networks.
32. The contribution of the children in care council to service design and development includes corporate parenting strategy, the care leaver survey, and new services such as sexual health and residential services. Children in care and care leavers have contributed to the development of the pledges to children in care and care leavers.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good.

33. There has been significant improvement in practice in some but not all areas identified in the SIF inspection and the 2018 focused visit. Core areas of social work practice still require further improvement following the introduction of the local authority's chosen social work model to ensure that children and families get a consistently good response. These include children's assessments, plans, recording of decision-making, management oversight, and case supervision.
34. There is a whole-council commitment to driving improvement for children and their families, and this is demonstrated through the significant investment in increasing workforce capacity, the early help offer, commissioned services and edge of care support.
35. The corporate parenting committee, safeguarding partnership, and scrutiny function provide appropriate challenge to operational services where deficiencies are highlighted. This means that senior leaders are held accountable for the performances of services and the experiences of children.
36. Strategic partnerships are mature and responsive to changing needs in operational conditions. This is demonstrated in: strong and collaborative multi-agency work; early help services; the integrated front door; the edge of care service; and strong contextual safeguarding arrangements.
37. Senior leaders are open to external scrutiny and respond positively to critical challenge. They use this to inform and direct improvement activity. However, this approach has not been comprehensive, meaning that some required improvements have not been identified or addressed. The senior leadership is aware of the variability of social work practice and has plans in place to address this through the implementation of their practice model. The impact of this variability for some children means that their needs are not fully identified or effectively met.
38. The local authority's self-evaluation recognised some of the strengths and areas of improvement identified during this inspection. However, some areas of weaker practice found during the inspection were not identified in the self-evaluation. Senior leaders were not fully aware of, for example, the quality of oversight of children within pre-proceedings, response to private fostering arrangements, or 16- and 17-year-old homeless and care leavers needing emergency accommodation. Checks and balances that are currently in place have not always 'caught' this weaker practice.
39. The local authority undertakes regular audit activity, and an audit tracker enables senior managers to have oversight of the findings, learning and progress of identified actions to improve practice. Leaders recognise that audits are over-optimistic and are not sufficiently evaluative in balancing the importance of

compliance with an analysis of the quality of social work practice and impact for children. The moderation process is not embedded and does not provide a realistic appraisal of the quality of practice.

40. Management oversight and supervision in the organisation does not provide sufficient challenge or reflection to enable staff to recognise deficits in practice and improve social work practice.
41. Senior leaders and managers have access to an array of comprehensive performance information. Monthly and quarterly reports provide analysis of performance and identify areas of focus. This has improved compliance in most areas of performance. However, performance information is not always scrutinised sufficiently to provide critical challenge of all services.
42. A strong training and development package and specific funding for additional staffing have enabled the local authority to increase workforce capacity and stability, reducing reliance on temporary agency staff. Children benefit from consistent and committed social workers who know them well. Social workers develop strong and trusted relationships with children and their parents.
43. Some social workers have higher caseloads than the local authority would want. These are monitored regularly by managers. For a small number of social workers, the volume and complexity of their workloads has meant that they have to prioritise work, resulting in drift in progress for some children.
44. The local authority's approach to increasing the skills of its workforce is well established. Training is strong and valued by staff, and there is a clear and well-supported career pathway.



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