

Telford and Wrekin Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 20 January 2020 to 31 January 2020

**Lead inspector: Alison Smale
Her 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 and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children's services in Telford and Wrekin are outstanding. Children benefit from high-quality social work and an impressive range of specialist services that improve their well-being and help to protect them from harm. Social workers and other staff who support children are very committed, and they are exceptionally well trained. Children are valued and receive child-focused services tailored to their individual needs. Children are listened to and their experiences are well understood and inform planning to improve their lives.

Corporate parenting is exceptionally strong. Children are cared for, and they are cared about. Children and their families benefit from creative high-quality services which support children to live with their families wherever possible. A significant number of children have been successfully diverted from alternative care and enabled to live safely with their birth families. When this is not in their interest, children benefit from high-quality carers and timely securing of permanence. Care

leavers benefit from strong and enduring relationships with personal advisers, who are responsive to their needs well into adulthood.

Senior leaders have implemented a clear and ambitious vision for vulnerable children and families in Telford and Wrekin, which has resulted in outstanding services that are benefiting children. Despite this success, they continue to work to continually improve services. They aspire to a service for every child that they would welcome for their own. Workforce development, recruitment and retention are particularly strong. Staff at all levels are valued and very well supported. This has developed a positive culture where social workers can practise safely and effectively and where they are making a positive impact on the lives of children and their families.

What needs to improve

- The quality of recording in children's plans and at key management decision points.

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

1. Children and families are offered highly effective early help and support when their needs are first identified. Thresholds are appropriately applied and understood. Strong multi-agency information-sharing supports effective decision-making, which is making a positive difference to children's lives. Families benefit from access to an impressive range of supportive and accessible services and helpful staff. Parents spoken to were extremely positive about the non-judgemental and helpful support they receive, which is making a difference to them and their children's lives.
2. Managers in the early help Strengthening Families hubs know the children and families in the community well. They allocate interventions and resources based on an effective need and risks-based approach. This is providing timely and targeted support to families where and when it is needed. Much of the work undertaken in the hubs is delivered by the local authority. Senior leaders recognise that there is more to be done to encourage partners to take a lead role in more early help plans.
3. Strong and effective multi-agency partnerships mean that children in need of help and protection are identified quickly and get the support they need. The multi-agency safeguarding hub, Family Connect, benefits from experienced social workers who are skilled at speaking with families and other professionals to ascertain information and identify risk and need. Social workers are professionally curious and passionate about safeguarding children and young people. They appropriately probe and explore issues with parents and other professionals. Historical factors are thoroughly explored to inform decision-making. Consent is well understood, sought or dispensed appropriately.

Consequently, children's needs are identified and decisions about next steps are made in a timely way by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers. Where needed, children and families are diverted to the appropriate service commensurate with their level of risk and need. Threshold decisions are appropriate, and staff are well informed and refer to the revised threshold guidance, including out of hours. Management oversight is strong and effective. In a very small number of cases, the recording of management decisions when timescales for enquiries need to be extended is not clear enough. While there is no detrimental impact for children, the rationale for the decisions is not made explicit.

4. Case summaries on children's records are a particular strength and provide an immediate and up-to-date overview of children's circumstances. They give an effective summary of the child's story, which helps those not familiar with the child's circumstances, for example those who work in the out-of-hours service, to understand key information quickly.
5. Child protection work is highly effective. Strategy discussions are timely and involve the right professionals. Where there are concerns about immediate harm, children are seen promptly to better protect them and inform initial risk assessments. Joint investigations are undertaken where appropriate. Child protection enquiries result in children receiving effective help and protection.
6. Child and family assessments are child-centred, and direct work ensures that social workers understand children's lives and circumstances. Timely assessments are well written and appropriately involve family members, differentiating between the needs of brothers and sisters. Children's current needs are effectively identified. Assessments could be further strengthened by better use of research to anticipate likely future harm.
7. Social workers know children very well. The experiences of children and the progress they make as a result of effective social work practice are good. The tenacious work undertaken by social workers, which they articulate very well, is not always reflected in children's written plans. Children's plans vary in the quality of how they are written. Actions can be quite general, are not timebound and are not always explicit for parents about what needs to change. Plans are reviewed at regular child in need and core group meetings.
8. Conference chairs ensure that child protection conferences are timely, involve the right people and make the right decisions for children. Review conferences consider actions within the plan and clarify what has been achieved and is still to be achieved. Children's circumstances improve through the help and protection they receive.
9. Pre-birth assessments are undertaken to a very high standard, and this is an area of excellent practice. Parents are offered appropriate help and support at the earliest stage. When there are concerns about potential significant harm, a

specialist team undertakes a pre-birth assessment at the earliest opportunity. Assessments are of a very high quality to inform future planning for the child at birth. When born, and when it is in the child's best interest, parents are supported to safely parent, and they benefit from a further parenting assessment to inform the longer-term plan. When children need to become looked after, managers are decisive, and, in these instances, family members are considered in a timely way. Planning for children to achieve permanence with their brothers and sisters is also well considered. This means that children are enabled to live with their family where it is safe to do so or that timely and effective action is taken to protect them.

10. The needs of disabled children are well understood. Social workers and caseworkers work well together to ensure that assessments are updated and inform support for disabled children and their families. Effective support helps children to lead fulfilling lives.
11. The designated officer ensures that allegations against anyone working with children are managed effectively. Consequently, children are appropriately protected.
12. Management oversight through regular supervision is evident in children's records. Actions are routinely recorded and followed up, which helps progress planning for children, mostly within their timescales.
13. The voice of the child is a real strength and an area of good practice across the whole service, including the voices of children in care and care leavers. Children are seen regularly, with visits tailored to their needs and presenting risks. Social workers take time to get to know their children through regular visiting, activities and direct work. This helps children to understand, at their own pace, their life experiences and plans for their futures. Social workers articulate children's daily life experiences well. Children's views and perspectives are reflected in their assessments and reviews of plans and in key meetings.
14. Children exposed to domestic abuse are recognised and are effectively afforded safety and protection. Children and their families who need specialist support benefit from a comprehensive range of services, such as a mental health support drop-in group, substance misuse support, a course for children who are potentially becoming involved in crime, and online counselling.
15. The response to children facing risks outside of the family is very strong and an area of excellent practice. Additional capacity has been created within the child sexual exploitation team to develop it into a children abused through exploitation team (CATE). Consultations offered by CATE workers add value and support social workers and other professionals working with children and families to better recognise and respond to child exploitation using recognised tools and approaches. Effective strategic and operational partnerships mean

that intelligence about the local child exploitation profile is well developed. Timely risk identification and analysis ensure that effective plans are in place to reduce and manage risk. Effective multi-agency information-sharing and decision-making take place through risk panel meetings. Children's voices and experiences are well understood and taken into account by the panel. Children receive highly effective help and support that mitigate risk well. Consequently, children's safety and well-being improve.

16. The local authority has begun to take a different approach to meeting the needs of and addressing risks to children who are experiencing neglect. Social workers articulate well the current assessment of harm. There is concerted work to provide parents with the skills to maintain long-term safe care. In a very small number of instances, the cumulative impact, resulting in chronic neglect, has not been responded to soon enough. Senior leaders acknowledged that they had more to do to ensure effective use of pre-proceedings, particularly for the small number of children experiencing chronic neglect. Senior managers made changes during the inspection to strengthen this.
17. Where 16- to 17-year-olds are at risk of homelessness, they are not always routinely offered section 20 accommodation, although their needs are well met. Senior leaders immediately made changes to the assessment process to ensure that care is offered as an option.
18. Private fostering arrangements are highly effective. Assessments identify children's needs well. Visits to children are commensurate with their level of need, and the voice of the child is strong and well represented in their records. Children are seen alone and away from their placement.
19. The response to monitoring children who are electively home educated is effective. In the last 12 months, the local authority has strengthened its response to monitoring pupils who are electively home educated. There is a clear approach to working with schools and families to ensure that parents are able to make informed decisions about whether or not to home educate and that the quality of education that each pupil receives is suitable. The local authority's 'Belonging Strategy' is designed to ensure inclusion for all. The principles underpinning this have informed revised policies and procedures for children who are not in full-time education. Local authority staff have a clear picture of who these children are and the schools they come from. They are persistent in following up concerns and work effectively with other local authority teams and external agencies. As a result, there are now fewer pupils who are on part-time timetables.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are: outstanding

20. Children in care and care leavers receive outstanding interventions and care. Family Solutions, which includes family group conferences, provides intensive

and non-time-limited interventions to enable families to sustain changes. A highly effective and creative service successfully assists children, especially older children, to remain with their birth family, or supports a return to their family wherever it is safe to do so. It is impressive that the local authority has successfully and safely diverted 42 young people aged 10 to 15 who were on the edge of care from care in the last 12 months, and has helped children to return home where it is safe to do so. Families are supported to ensure that changes are sustainable, avoiding the need for further care episodes and reducing the need for further statutory involvement. Exit strategies are carefully planned to ensure that families can sustain change themselves.

21. Social work evidence to court is very detailed, providing a clear overview of assessments completed and the rationale for plans and recommendations. Family members are assessed as carers, with assessments completed to a high standard in a timely manner. Cafcass was very complimentary about the quality of court work. This is leading to swift legal permanence for children, which improves their life chances.
22. Care planning for children in care is thorough and highly effective. Children's care plans are very well written and provide clear and sensitive insights into children's experiences and how their needs will be met. Care planning meetings held regularly between children's reviews are a particularly strong area of practice and ensure that information is shared and that staff have a strong grip on children's progress and their plans. This makes a real difference to children's lives.
23. Children's looked after reviews are regular and permanence options are routinely considered at the second review. This results in timely permanence for children. Increased investment in the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service has resulted in reduced caseloads and has improved IROs' oversight of care planning, which ensures that children's plans progress. There is a particularly strong system to ensure timely permanence. IROs provide clarity about whether they endorse the local authority plan, but review records are not always clear about timescales for implementing contingency plans to avoid drift and delay. IROs escalate any concerns to managers, but the effectiveness of this is insufficiently evidenced in recording and tracking systems.
24. Direct work with children in care is a real strength and area of excellence. Social workers know their children well and clearly articulate the child's needs and plans. Children are seen regularly and encouraged to participate in care planning meetings and reviews wherever possible. Children's views are recorded well, and the lived experiences of even very young children are captured in the records. Children are helped to understand their rights, and have access to advocacy where required. Children's and care leavers' achievements are celebrated. Senior leaders are ambitious for their future. VOICE is an active child in care council, which ensures that the views of young people are heard. Senior leaders have been responsive to the input of care

leavers and children in care. For example, they have developed the care leaver lounge, which provides a safe place to meet, mentoring support and 'Leavers Lounge' events. Events include well-being sessions, music club, financial advice and pamper sessions.

25. Since the last inspection, the responses when children go missing from care or home have improved significantly. Children are safeguarded effectively. Return home interviews occur and inform future safety planning. Practitioners take time to explore with children why they run away and take proportionate and appropriate follow-up action to prevent further incidents. As a consequence, the number of repeat missing episodes has reduced.
26. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive very sensitive and effective responses to their needs. They are well supported, and their needs are understood. For example, most children are deliberately placed out of the area, with good care planning and visiting to ensure that their cultural and community inclusion needs are met. Meaningful and regular visits by social workers mean that the children remain connected to the local authority.
27. A very strong focus on promoting and sustaining the health needs of children in care results in their health needs being very well met and tracked through care planning meetings, plans and reviews. There is a particularly strong focus on the emotional and mental health needs of children and young people. Child and adolescent mental health workers are accessible, providing guidance to carers and workers on how best to meet children's emotional needs and improve their well-being. When additional support is required, children in care have access to highly responsive services, both in-house and through individually commissioned services. Strength and difficulties questionnaires are completed for some children, but are not utilised beyond a score in plans and reviews. This is a missed opportunity to understand children's emotional needs even better.
28. There have been significant developments to the virtual school in the last 18 months. This has resulted in clear improvements. The restructured team, which is led effectively by the virtual school headteacher, provides both support and challenge for school leaders. Schools speak positively about the quality of training received. This has resulted in improved consistency in the timeliness and quality of personal education plans. However, some targets are not yet specific enough to help pupils make strong progress. Outcomes are broadly similar to those seen for children in care nationally. Children have access to a range of fun activities outside school, such as horse riding, membership of youth groups and participation in sport.
29. Stability and permanence for children are a real strength. Careful consideration is given to matching children to the appropriate carers. Children are supported to remain in long-term placements that meet their needs well. Children will only move when it is in line with care planning and in their best interests.

Wherever possible, brothers and sisters remain together, and safe and regular contact with family members is facilitated.

30. Permanence is considered through reviews, and regular and detailed dialogue takes place with carers and children through visits and regular care planning meetings. Children in long-term foster placements are formally matched so they have security in their long-term placement with carers. Children who are placed out of area receive regular and purposeful contact and visits from their social worker. Social workers communicate and engage well with care staff in residential care to ensure that placements meet children's needs to a high standard.
31. Connected carers are well supported, and there is very good engagement between the children's social worker and the foster carers' social worker. Children are supported to stay with family carers, and permanence options via special guardianship orders (SGOs) are considered. For a very small number of children, there is a delay in progressing the final SGO plans. These children are not affected by this, as they are placed with the family carer, but it does result in delay in securing confirmation of permanence.
32. Life-story work is a strength and area of exceptional practice. It is not seen as a 'one off' piece of work, but is continually revisited throughout a child's life and at key developmental stages. Dedicated and appropriately trained therapeutic practitioners work directly with some children. They provide training to benchmark 'what good looks like'. They also run weekly clinics to support social workers to increase their confidence in helping children to understand and capture their memories and journey. Memory boxes are routinely collated by foster carers, which ensures photos are collected to capture important events and people for children in care. Life-story work is collated to help babies and young children to understand how and why decisions were taken. Effective direct work with older children helps them to understand why they are in care and to plan for their futures.
33. A positive change to in-house marketing is ensuring active recruitment is taking place for both foster and adoptive carers. Assessments of foster carers are timely, detailed and analytical. The preparation and training of prospective foster carers is thorough and enables them to have an insightful understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering task. The fostering panel is appropriately challenging and highly effective, providing a strong quality assurance function. The agency decision-maker makes reasoned decisions, with clear qualifying determinations.
34. Children are considered for adoption at the earliest opportunity and receive timely permanence through adoption. Adoption assessments are timely, concise and analytical. They give an accurate reflection of adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities, enabling effective matching to take place. Fostering for adoption approval for early permanence placements is included in pre-approval

training and, if considered, is fully explored in assessments. The adoption panel works effectively and promotes safe, secure and stable placements.

35. Care leavers benefit from stable and enduring relationships with their personal advisers. Personal advisers know their young people very well and are fully engaged in planning for young people's move to independence. Young people are seen regularly and in accordance with need. They told inspectors that their personal advisers were highly responsive and supportive. High but realistic aspirations for care leavers result in growing confidence among young people. Care leavers continue to be actively supported beyond 21 years of age where needed.
36. Pathway plans are completed with young people and their views are incorporated and influence planning. The disabilities transition worker has developed a new format which is more accessible, but the impact of this cannot be evaluated as it has not yet been rolled out. Most care leavers have copies of key documents, including the local offer, so that they are supported to understand their rights and entitlements. Not all young people have copies of their health information to help them understand their health history.
37. Young people receive support to access employment, education and training that maximise their work opportunities. Care leavers benefit from additional group activities that develop their skills and provide social opportunities, such as a residential driving course. A range of accommodation is available, and the local authority actively seeks feedback from young people about the quality of this. Care leavers, including disabled young people, benefit from staying put and the continuity of care this offers them into adulthood.

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

38. Senior leaders have a clear and transformative vision for services to sustainably improve the lives of vulnerable children and their families in Telford and Wrekin. Members and senior officers work together successfully to deliver this ambitious agenda to improve services, which has been implemented and embedded by committed and skilled social workers and managers. More mature and creative approaches are being generated at all levels to work effectively with families and improve children's life chances and outcomes.
39. Leaders are having a very positive impact across the service. Strategic planning is exceptional. A strong focus on building resilience through programmes based on community assets ensures that resources are effectively targeted to where they are needed most. As a result, the local authority is future-proofing sustainable services to support children and families to give them better life chances.

40. Strong corporate commitment to prioritising children's social care has enabled the service to develop and improve. Senior leaders understand the strengths and priorities, holding officers to account. Leaders, managers and social workers take corporate parenting very seriously and are highly ambitious for children in care and care leavers. Children in care and care leavers are cared for and they are cared about. Children in care and care leavers receive an outstanding service, supported by strong fostering and adoption services and a virtual school that advocates strongly for children.
41. The senior management team and frontline managers are highly visible and effective, and this has created strong foundations to develop and sustain good social work practice. This is making a significant difference to the lives of children and their families in Telford and Wrekin. Social workers and other support staff are valued and invested in as the most precious resource for vulnerable children and families. This is paying dividends, meaning that social workers are very well supported to work with families to achieve positive change. Staff value the co-productive management approach to problem-solving and professional autonomy within a practice structure supported by a clear practice model.
42. A real strength is that social workers and other support staff benefit from a very strong learning culture. Examples include reflective group supervision, learning from external associates with expertise, investment in a range of quality training and development and building expert capacity within teams. Senior leaders know that their recently strengthened approach to audit needs to be further embedded to ensure consistency. Audits are beginning to include managers and social workers at all levels, which offers an additional learning opportunity to reflect on and improve practice. The social work practice model is well embedded, enabling a strength and relationship-based culture of practice that is benefiting children and families.
43. The sufficiency strategy provides clear analysis, which enables the service to plan effectively for future demands and is aligned with other strategies to support children and families. A range of interventions have been developed to strengthen services and respond to changing demand. Services support young people effectively and enable parents to improve their parenting and the lives of children. These include Strengthening Families, Family Solutions, the CATE team, family group conferences, and a range of commissioned services, including community assets such as a company set up by two care leavers to train and mentor children in care and care leavers and the Telford after-care team (a community-interest company run by ex-service users).
44. Children and young people are listened to both individually in relation to their unique lives and also to influence and improve services. A range of consultation has taken place with children to inform service development and understand their experience of the service. It is a strength that safeguarding work is informed by more than 40 children's safeguarding boards, run in schools with

children across the borough, together with an annual children and families conference to ensure that children's voices are represented. Both the children in care and care leavers council meet regularly and their views have a clear influence on improving services.

45. Leaders and managers know their service well, based on improved performance management information. Areas for development identified in this inspection were already well understood by leaders and built into improvement plans. During this inspection, leaders offered a forensic level of reflection on findings. This stimulated new ideas, which they immediately put into practice as actions to further improve the service.
46. Senior managers have reflected on the need to improve recording of management decisions and acknowledged that improvements are needed in recording management discussions by frontline managers. For a very small number of children experiencing long-term chronic neglect, management checks and balances at key decision-making points need to be strengthened to ensure that oversight and decision-making for these children are robust and clearly recorded.
47. Children benefit from a stable social work workforce, which is highly committed and experienced. Despite this, the local authority continues to strengthen its ability to retain and attract social workers with the implementation of a new career progression and pay structure for social workers. Most staff have manageable workloads, which enables them to do meaningful social work with children. Social workers benefit from one-to-one supervision, which is further enhanced by regular group supervision, focused on a particular case and based on the local authority's systemic practice model. Social workers and other support staff are exceptionally well trained. They access a wide range of development opportunities, which improves their expertise and confidence. Skill capacity is further enhanced by training social workers to train others in specific areas and build capacity and expertise within teams.



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