

Inspection of Leicester City Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 20 September 2021 to 1 October 2021

Lead inspector: Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector

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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children's services have continued to build on the improvements evident at the last Ofsted local authority judgement inspection, in 2017, which judged services to require improvement. This inspection has continued to see improvements being made in all services, with help and protection and children in care services now judged to be good.

In 2020 and 2021, the city of Leicester was significantly affected by COVID-19 and, due to the very high rates of infection, was subject to increased local lockdown arrangements throughout the pandemic and until recently. However, children's services continued to provide a robust level of support for all children known to children's social care, including ongoing face-to-face visits, to ensure that they were safe and protected and their welfare was being promoted.

Inspectors saw a robust management focus on improving services to benefit children and families, including the effective roll-out of a nationally recognised model of social work practice. The use of performance data shows that the local authority knows

itself well. In the main, help and protection services are timely, and well focused on addressing risk and promoting the welfare of the most vulnerable children. Strong support is provided to families through effective early intervention and through preventative work prior to family court proceedings.

For the majority of children in care, social work support recognises well children's individual needs and focuses on progressing permanence as promptly as possible, including return to parents or family. Direct work, children's participation and care leaving services are impressive strengths in Leicester.

In a small number of children's cases, however, the quality of social work practice, management decision-making or recording is not to as high a standard as that delivered to the vast majority of children and families.

What needs to improve?

- The coordination of private fostering support.
- Designated officer arrangements, ensuring that all identified actions are completed.
- Sufficiency of placements and support provided for children and young people aged 16 and over.
- The consistency of the recording of social work involvement and management oversight.
- The consistency of case file auditing and identification of learning for the organisation.

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

1. Children in Leicester are well protected from harm. Their needs are well assessed and understood, and a wide range of services and interventions are available to help improve their circumstances.
2. Families benefit from a comprehensive early help offer. They receive proportionate support and signposting to a variety of community services and parenting programmes which help them to address needs. Skilled workers support children and families to improve children's circumstances and prevent escalation of issues.
3. When concerns for children are referred to children's services, thorough enquiries are made promptly, including consideration of historical information. Thresholds are well understood by partner agencies and acted on by the 'front door' staff.
4. Decisions to hold a strategy meeting are made appropriately. These meetings take place promptly and are well attended by partners, informing clear plans. Child protection enquiries are proportionate, sensitive and well focused on the children.
5. Children benefit from thorough assessments. Good use is made of age-appropriate and culturally sensitive direct work tools. This means that decisions as to further support or intervention and safety plans are well informed by children's views. There are many different cultures and diverse communities in Leicester and social workers have a clear understanding of the cultural needs of children and families. Where needed, social workers make sure that interpreters are involved to help gain an accurate assessment of family experience.
6. Strong assessments are ensuring that children are on the most appropriate plan according to their risk and needs. Child protection and children in need plans are

regularly updated, although the recorded actions are not always clear on what difference they will make for children, and how the success of those actions will be measured.

7. Core groups are well attended and recorded, with active involvement from family members, carers and professionals. Progress against plans is tracked effectively, making a positive difference in reducing risk. Where children's circumstances do not improve through child protection planning, early consideration is given to pre-proceedings, avoiding any unnecessary delay in responding to continuing or increasing concerns.
8. There is a highly effective system in place to ensure that children's circumstances in pre-proceedings are tracked and progressed, with children at the heart of decision-making. Creative and resilient work tackles entrenched and concerning parental behaviours and is frequently successful in supporting children to remain safely with their family.
9. Children and families benefit from access to a wide range of support services, including multi-systemic therapy and the functional family therapy team. Social work practice is enriched by this co-worked approach and this results in children living with greater emotional warmth, improved living conditions and better school attendance.
10. Where children are identified as being at risk of exploitation, risk assessments are routinely completed and forwarded to a specialist team manager for oversight and direction. When children are at high risk, daily management meetings consider changes in circumstances, with children engaged in safety planning and decision-making to empower them as much as possible to take positive control of their circumstances.
11. When children go missing from home or care, return home interviews are conducted by workers from the child exploitation team. The best examples of these are explorative and attempt to ascertain the child's reason and pull factors for going missing.
12. A very small number of children live in private fostering arrangements and some benefit from robust assessment and support. However, for others, visits to review their circumstances are not always timely, and not enough consideration is given to the impact on children when circumstances change.
13. In the majority of cases, the responses to concerns about professionals who may present risks to children are robust. The designated officer coordinates the work of agencies, participates in a range of formal meetings and advises actions to be taken appropriately. However, inspectors saw a very small number of cases where not all of the identified actions had been completed.

14. There is a clear protocol with respect to 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless. However, children's records do not always detail whether the protocol had been followed, in particular whether children were made aware of their options and entitlements.
15. Leaders have oversight of children missing education and those who are home educated, supported by effective tracking systems. Leaders do not shy away from using statutory attendance orders to ensure that children attend school or receive their education in appropriately registered places.
16. The number of electively home-educated children has increased significantly following the national restrictions due to the pandemic. Leaders ensure that the well-being of these children is a priority, and that checks are undertaken to confirm that there is suitable support for all children who are home educated.

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

17. Children come into care at the right time, following careful and thoughtful consideration. There is effective exploration of children's circumstances, with professionals ensuring that decisions are in the child's best interests. In most cases, these decisions are pre-planned and appropriate following long-standing intervention with families who have been unable to sustain and maintain change. In a small number of cases, children have come into care due to escalating risks which require urgent responses. There is appropriate response in these circumstances, which swiftly ensures that children are protected and well cared for.
18. Social workers are tenacious and endeavour to explore all situations thoroughly to support children to live within their extended families whenever possible. They promptly and robustly assess alternative carers. Children live with their siblings whenever possible through effective and assessed consideration of an individual's needs.
19. Social workers apply careful consideration when matching and placing children. As a result, children are able to develop nurturing and positive relationships with their carers. For the vast majority of children in residential care, support meets their needs well. Some children live with their foster carers well into adulthood, meaning that these children have stable, forever homes.
20. Children's plans are thoroughly reviewed and scrutinised to ensure that they continue to meet children's needs. Independent reviewing officers provide a good level of support and challenge to practice. They maintain an oversight of progress between planning meetings and keep a strong child focus. They know

the children very well and prepare and communicate with them to enable children to participate in important meetings.

21. Direct work with children is of an excellent quality and children's views are central in decision-making about their lives. Social workers ensure that children are seen regularly and alone in order to develop positive relationships. This allows social workers to complete creative and age-appropriate work to secure children's views.
22. When safeguarding concerns arise for children in care, the appropriate actions are taken to ensure that the children are protected. There is effective use of child protection processes to ensure that concerns are explored and addressed.
23. Early consideration is given to permanence planning in all situations regardless of the circumstances, including to support reunification with parents. Regular permanence planning meetings help to drive progress, and ensure that all necessary assessments are taking place or commissioned accordingly. Delay in achieving permanence for children is rare. Once decisions have been made for permanence for children, these are progressed in a timely manner. This is the case irrespective of which permanence option is identified to be in the best interests of the child. Children's life-story work is sensitively and imaginatively completed for children with permanence decisions, to ensure that they have a comprehensive understanding of their families and experiences.
24. Children are mostly safe and settled where they live. However, there are some young people, over 16 years old, who are not receiving the level of support that they need. At the time of the inspection, these included a small number of young people with complex needs and vulnerabilities, some of whom were asylum seekers. Their assessed needs were not always fully met in the care provided or from the level of support they received.
25. Recruitment and assessment of foster carers and adopters is thorough, timely and analytical. Training builds their confidence and enables children to be well matched to their carers or adopters.
26. Children's relationships with their own families are maintained and supported. Social workers ensure that opportunities for regular family time occur, no matter where families are located or what the barriers may be.
27. For disabled children in care, their needs are well met within the mainstream social work teams. There is good consideration of their complex needs and communication styles within assessments and plans. Children's cultural and diversity needs are also well understood and met, with good use of interpreters, enabling all children in care to have their voice and views heard.

28. The virtual school is ambitious in ensuring that children and young people in the care system make good educational progress at school or other provision. Leaders and staff know individual children well. They adopt an approach of 'as if it were my child' in meeting the needs of children in care. Children in care make good progress from their starting points. The achievement of children is celebrated through popular annual awards events and residential programmes, such as the Tall Ships sailing programme. Personal education plans are reviewed regularly, although there is some variability in the detail recorded. Leaders have taken effective action to promote good attendance and keep the number of exclusions from school for children in care as low as possible.
29. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive leaving care offer, which is highly effectively delivered by an enthusiastic team of leaving care advisers. For many children, this is making a positive difference to their lives.
30. Early consideration of planning means that most young people are supported to transition to independence at the right time for them. Pathway plans reflect the needs and skills of individuals, and appropriate support packages are developed for when they leave care. This means that many care leavers can fulfil their potential in completing apprenticeships, getting jobs and being able to parent their own children successfully.
31. Social workers and leaving care advisers are ambitious for their children. Care leavers value the positive relationships and support they receive from leaving care advisers. This enables care leavers to feel valued, which supports them in maintaining their independence and achieving their goals. Excellent support is provided to care leavers who are able or wish to attend higher education, including the maintenance of staying put arrangements for those in foster care. Nineteen per cent of this year's care leavers have entered university, demonstrating the success of the enhanced support.
32. Care leavers are well supported into employment, education and training. The leaving care team works closely with external organisations, including Leicestershire Cares, to enable care leavers to meet with local employers to discuss their futures.

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

33. There have been continued improvements in children's services since the last Ofsted inspection and all services are now judged to be good. Particular strengths were identified by inspectors in earlier intervention, direct work with families, support to families in pre-proceedings, care leaver services and in children's participation.

34. Leicester was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and, due to the very high rates of infection, was subject to additional local lockdown arrangements until recently. During the lockdown periods, children's services continued to provide a robust level of support for all children, including ongoing face-to-face visits to ensure that children were protected and their welfare promoted. Despite the personal and professional impact on social workers and managers, inspectors saw no dip in the high quality of support being offered to children and families during this time and this was impressive.
35. An improvement board supports the drive to continue to improve services. This is chaired by a highly experienced independent social care manager who robustly supports and challenges key personnel in Leicester, with an aim to be delivering consistently outstanding services within the next two years.
36. Children's services are now seen to be an important component of the council. Over the last few years, services have received additional financial support, and this has now resulted in an effectively resourced organisation.
37. A new strategic director, who was appointed at the beginning of the pandemic, has focused well on developing a longer-term perspective on continuing to improve services. This builds on the work of the director of children's social care and her senior management team, who have worked tenaciously to steadily improve operational services. Reprioritising with partner agencies to a focus on earlier support, across the range of diverse cultures and communities in the city, has also resulted in better identification of need and targeted support for vulnerable children across the city.
38. The skilled and experienced lead member has been in post for six years and has worked robustly with other councillors and departmental heads to ensure a wider understanding of the children's services' role. In particular, she has succeeded in improving the ownership of corporate parenting responsibilities. Corporate parenting is now undertaken through a number of 'delivery groups'. These are led by senior personnel and involve councillors, officers from across the council, and children and young people.
39. Senior managers are highly aspirational for their services to continue to improve the lives of the vulnerable children in Leicester. They have concentrated on getting systems in place that allowed managers and social workers to do their job properly and to improve as practitioners. Social workers who met inspectors described how they appreciated the culture of high challenge and the support they receive. They spoke about the system of 'commendations', which they receive following compliments from families or in recognition of a good-quality piece of work they have completed.
40. Performance data is accurate and detailed and contains useful analysis. It demonstrates that the authority knows itself well. Regular performance and quality assurance reports and meetings, attended by managers, focus not only

on compliance but also on what the findings indicate about the experience of the children. Quality assurance includes excellent examples of good practice/success reviews, and in-depth 'deep dives' into a range of practice issues. Although there are a high number of audits undertaken each month, these are of a variable quality and the thematic learning for the organisation is not always sufficiently clear.

41. The voice of the child is integral to the improvement of services in Leicester. Throughout the inspection, inspectors saw the voice of the child sought in individual case work and in planning meetings, supported by excellent advocacy arrangements. Children's participation in strategic planning is also a strength in the city. There are a wide range of opportunities available for children to be involved in the co-production of information, materials and websites. A number of nationally recognised videos have been produced by individuals and groups of young people. These well-established opportunities continued through the long periods of lockdown experienced by Leicester and led to innovative projects to ensure that children and young people were not isolated during those exceptional times. Inspectors also met a range of children and young people from established groups, including Care Experienced Consultants, the Big Mouth Forum and the Generation Select group, who are a driving force in ensuring that services improve in the city.
42. In the main, the local authority's current self-evaluation is accurate. However, it did not identify the issues with placement sufficiency that inspectors found on site. As a result of the lack of placements for children and young people over the age of 16, there were a small number of young people in unregistered provision and a higher number in unregulated provision. Inspectors assured themselves that, for the most vulnerable children who had been placed in unregistered provision, due to a lack of nationally suitable registered providers and as a result of orders made by the high court, there were as robust arrangements as possible to protect them. Many of the young people in unregulated supported accommodation were appropriately placed to promote their independence. However, a small number of these young people were not receiving the level of assistance identified as necessary in their assessments, including some asylum-seeking young people. As a result of inspectors identifying these issues, senior managers reviewed all the young people in these placements to ensure that the packages of support did meet their needs.
43. One of the significant strengths of children's services in Leicester is that many of the staff have remained with the authority for many years. This provides a bedrock of stability, which can be seen across the experiences of many children who have been supported by social workers who know them well and have excellent relationships with them which can support changes to happen.
44. A nationally recognised model of social work practice has been embraced by children's services in Leicester. Although the model is not yet fully embedded,

staff and partner agencies use it on a daily basis, resulting in a good, shared understanding with the family of the risks to children and what needs to change.

45. Social workers are well supported by their managers in terms of availability and in helping them make the right decision. They spoke to inspectors about how much they appreciated the support they had received during the additional local lockdown arrangements and in preparing them for the recent service-wide return to the office space. Most social workers receive good-quality, in-depth supervision sessions. Social work documentation is generally up to date and of a good quality. In the main, the recording of management decision-making is clear. However, for a small number of children, the quality of the documentation, including the recording of management decision-making, is not of that consistently high standard.
46. All the social workers who met inspectors reported that their caseloads were of a manageable size, allowing them to engage purposefully with families. The many examples of direct work seen by inspectors across help and protection and children in care were of a very high quality, ensuring that progress was being made to improve children's lives.



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