

Inspection of Walsall local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 4 to 15 October 2021

Lead inspector: Julie Knight, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

An ambitious and stable senior leadership team is dedicated to the delivery of the Walsall Right 4 Children transformation programme, launched in September 2018. Since the previous inspection in 2017, outcomes for children and their families have been improving and children's services are now good. There has been deliberate corporate investment in children's services, to create a skilled and stable workforce. As a result, some exceptional practice from social workers helps children's experiences improve and supports families to make positive changes to their lives. Senior leaders have consistently and actively sought the views of children, their families and staff, which is integral to shaping the positive cultural and structural changes within this transformation programme. Senior leaders know that some recommendations from the last inspection have taken too long to progress. This includes the development of services for children living in private fostering arrangements.

Attentive senior leaders have prioritised and made investments in workforce recruitment, retention and well-being. This has resulted in increased staff stability. Senior leaders have ensured that they understand the impact of COVID-19 on staff, children and their families. Consistent and appropriate support is provided to those considered most vulnerable. During the pandemic, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme provided online support during lockdown and then face-to-face activities for children of all ages. 'The Big Conversation' activities included a daily conversation with families to understand the impact of COVID-19, with their views

used to target support services in localities. Despite the demands placed on services during the pandemic, the council implemented an impressive strength-based multi-agency model of practice that demonstrates positive progress and reduced risks to children.

What needs to improve?

- The application of thresholds, so that children receiving early help support can access statutory services when they need help and protection.
- Management oversight and support for children living in private fostering arrangements.
- Consistency in the quality of supervision records and analysis in the recording of frontline management oversight.
- Management oversight of children living in unregistered children's homes.

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

1. When children need support, they receive this quickly from the early help service, getting the right help at the right time. Early help intervention is purposeful, and assessments identify children's needs effectively and offer appropriate support. This support includes Turning Point, a multidisciplinary team with specialist knowledge of youth services, NHS speech and language services, substance misuse services and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
2. A refresh of the early help offer has resulted in the recent combination of the early help 'front door' with the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Children's contacts to the MASH are triaged, parental consent is appropriately obtained, and children and their families are allocated promptly to an early help family support worker. When concerns increase for children's well-being and safety, early help workers appropriately refer these new concerns to the MASH. For some children, these are not always accepted promptly and too many contacts identifying repeated concerns for children are not accepted by children's social care. This means that some children's escalating needs and risks go unidentified for too long and some children do not receive statutory intervention when they should. A daily meeting between the early help and MASH team managers is helping to address threshold concerns; however, it is too soon to see the impact of this in decision-making for children.
3. Children identified as being at immediate risk of significant harm receive a prompt response from the MASH and are visited quickly. The vast majority of child protection concerns are appropriately progressed to a timely multi-agency strategy meeting. For a few children, strategy meetings take place after child protection enquiries have been initiated. This results in a missed opportunity for

the multi-agency partnership to consider the increased risks to children and to make informed decisions about next steps.

4. Contacts and referrals to the MASH for children who experience or have witnessed domestic abuse are promptly discussed at the multi-agency domestic abuse daily triage meeting. Some contacts from the police do not always have sufficient detailed information about children. This results in delay, as workers must spend time finding additional information to inform decision-making. Once relevant information is obtained, partners share information effectively in the triage meeting. This brings together current and historic information about children to support analysis of risk.
5. The response to children at risk of exploitation and children reported missing from home and care has improved significantly since the previous inspection in 2017 and a focused visit in December 2019. Professionals have a shared understanding of thresholds for exploited and missing children, enhanced by the daily multi-agency triage meeting in the MASH. This includes a range of specialist workers from the police, youth offending team, education, street teams, Turning Point, specialist sexual and criminal exploitation workers and the early help service. Professionals work closely together and collaborate well. Strategy meetings are appropriately convened when risks to children escalate. The vast majority of children who go missing are offered a timely return home interview and acceptance of these interviews is increasing.
6. Child protection investigations are comprehensive. Professionals appropriately share information about children and families, and this supports an effective analysis of risk and decision-making for next steps. Risks to children are identified and responded to swiftly by workers in daytime services and the out-of-hours service. Social workers demonstrate a resolute focus on understanding the impact of domestic abuse, poor parental mental health, physical abuse and neglect. Family histories are carefully analysed, with appropriate recommendations made and actions taken to safeguard children. The out-of-hours service ensures that written communication with day services is prompt and evaluative.
7. Children are visited in a timely way by social workers in the duty and assessment teams. Children's views are consistently sought, and they are engaged effectively in age-appropriate direct work that is tailored to their needs. The majority of children's assessments are thorough and analytical, supported by information about children's family history and the views of children, their families and partner agencies. Assessments are responsive and completed in accordance with the needs of the child and their family. Managers have appropriate oversight of assessments and provide a clear rationale about next steps. Assessments lead to children and families being offered appropriate services to support them with their needs.
8. Impressive, effective and creative multi-agency intervention in the locality safeguarding teams is providing sustained change by improving children's

experiences and reducing risks. Co-location of professionals is providing intensive wraparound support for children, which has helped parents make and sustain changes to improve children's circumstances. Staff work sensitively and skilfully, using the implemented model of social work practice to understand parental and family histories and the impact on parents of mental illness, domestic abuse and substance misuse. Co-location in the west locality with early help colleagues and other partners working within the locality, including the Department for Work and Pensions, school nurses and health visitors, is being undertaken as a pilot and will be rolled out across other locality areas in 2022.

9. Effective multi-agency group supervision, using the model of social work practice in the locality teams, provides comprehensive analysis of children's progress. Constructive challenge ensures a shared focus on the children and their needs. This helps to progress children's plans, despite inconsistency in the quality of individual supervision and recording of management oversight in some children's records.
10. Children in need and children subject to a child protection plan are helped and supported through regular meetings and consistent attendance from partner agencies. The majority of children's plans reflect their needs, although some children's written plans are too generic and do not fully reflect the effective social work intervention taking place. When children's circumstances change, decisions are appropriately made to ensure that the level of intervention is proportionate to the child and family's identified needs and level of risk.
11. Disabled children receive highly effective support and help to meet their needs. Children's assessments are comprehensive and they appropriately consider the needs of brothers and sisters and the wider family circumstances. Workers in the disabled children's services show commitment and dedication in obtaining the views of disabled children, which then appropriately inform their child-in-need or care plan. Some exceptional and sensitive work is completed by workers who know children well.
12. At the previous inspection in 2017, it was recommended that managers and social workers correctly apply private fostering regulations. Progress to improve the assessment and safeguarding checks of carers has been too slow. When private fostering arrangements are identified for some children, there is delay in completion of private foster carer assessments. Not all safeguarding checks are completed quickly enough, so some children may be living with carers with unidentified risks. Few children subject to these arrangements have a sufficiently robust contingency plan, should their circumstances change.
13. A small number of children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are not made aware of their rights and entitlements. There is insufficient professional curiosity shown to fully understand the needs and potential risks faced by these children. For some children, intervention is ended too early, without ensuring sustainability of their housing arrangements.

14. Children are appropriately subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO) when risks to them increase, and pre-proceedings are used effectively. Senior leaders have identified that a small number of children experience drift and delay in progressing decisions that will reduce risks for them and improve their lived experiences. A recently developed PLO toolkit has not yet been launched, so it is too soon to see the impact of this for all children.
15. There is robust oversight of children who are electively home educated (EHE). There is strong partnership working with schools through a new EHE policy and positive relationships with families. An inclusion policy and enhanced tracking and monitoring of vulnerable pupils' attendance are now in place. Leaders know where children are and provide comprehensive support if they are not in school.

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

16. Most children come into care when it is the right decision for them to do so. Children live with carers who can meet their needs. Social workers work effectively with families to explore any options for children to live with their extended family members or friends when it is safe for them to do so. Care proceedings are initiated when this is in the child's best interest and permanence options for most children are appropriately considered early, with decisions reached through timely looked after reviews. Effective multi-agency collaboration and communication support planning for children, including the Daisy Project that supports parents who have had one or more children permanently removed from their care. The judge spoke positively about Walsall's work in the Family Drug and Alcohol Court. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is positive about relationships with the local authority and social work practice within care proceedings.
17. The vast majority of permanence decisions for children are timely and children live in good-quality, stable homes if they cannot live with their families. Together or apart assessments are completed to a high standard, considering a thorough assessment of each child's needs appropriately, using research, guidance and assessment tools to determine whether brothers and sisters should remain together. Decisions to place children subject to a care order with their parents are well considered, based on thorough assessments with clear child-focused transition plans. Children and their families are provided with appropriate support and revocation of care orders is considered when the time is right.
18. Children build strong and trusting relationships with their social workers. Children's views are listened to and this helps to inform children's assessments and planning. Child and family assessments are reviewed regularly and appropriately involve the child, family and partner agencies. Children's needs in relation to their ethnicity and culture are well considered and children are supported to understand their heritage and family identity. Social workers write to the child when they record their visits. This helps children to understand

their care journey and why decisions are made about them. Inspectors found excellent examples of sensitive and skilled life-story work that helps children to understand their experiences.

19. Children's wishes are prioritised and taken into consideration when decisions are made about care planning. Children are supported to attend and participate in their review meetings. Independent reviewing officers' (IROs) recording of children's reviews are written directly to the child. These records are of high quality, child-focused and sensitive. IROs ensure that children have a clear understanding of why decisions are made. Due consideration is given to different care planning options and the rationale for the preferred plan for children is clearly recorded. IROs ensure that the vast majority of children's permanence plans are appropriately in place by the second review.
20. Children's care plans vary in their quality and detail of information. While children's care plans provide an overview of the overarching plan for children, some provide only limited detail. Recording in children's plans does not reflect the effective intervention and help children receive from their social workers.
21. Supervision records vary in quality and regularity in individual children's records. Supervision is not sufficiently frequent for some children who are subject to care proceedings and whose plan is still developing and may be subject to significant change. Legal gateway meetings and weekly permanence panels provide additional senior management oversight, thus reducing delays in progressing children's plans for permanence.
22. Inspectors met with children in care and care leavers, who reported positively about where they live, feeling safe and well cared for. Children and young people told inspectors that they feel supported by their social workers and personal advisers (PAs) and they are fully involved in making decisions about their lives.
23. Children and young people involved in the Children in Care Council (CiCC) feel it has benefited them greatly, raising their confidence and self-esteem. Some have developed new skills, and say the CiCC provides opportunities for them to meet other children in care, participate in staff interviews and influence the corporate parenting board. Children commented that the CiCC 'has helped me develop confidence' and 'has helped me with public speaking'. Senior leaders are currently refreshing the CiCC, having identified the scope of membership as currently too narrow.
24. Children in care who go missing or are at risk of exploitation benefit from victim-focused exploitation assessments. Underpinned by a revised all-age exploitation strategy, prompt action is taken to share information in the multi-agency daily triage teams, leading to effective coordination and targeted interventions for children at most risk. Persistent and intensive work by dedicated commissioned teams, for example Turning Point and street teams,

engages many highly vulnerable children in care and care leavers effectively and reduces risk of further serious harm.

25. Children's physical and emotional health and well-being needs are well considered and appropriately met. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported well. They are appropriately looked after and helped to access education and accommodation that meet their individual needs. Mental health support is timely and effective for children and their carers through services such as the fostering, looked-after and adoption support hub (FLASH) CAMHS. Disabled children reaching adulthood receive an effective and timely multidisciplinary service to support them and their families to transition to adult services.
26. Children in care and care leavers receive a comprehensive offer and tailored support from the virtual school. Pupil premium funding supports the central virtual school team, which includes tutors, mentors, a careers adviser and a CAMHS worker. Schools were involved in developing this model and funding appropriately supports children's wide range of needs and interests. Risk assessments are completed on each child, which helps identify children who may be at risk of underachievement or exclusion from school, so that they receive appropriate, targeted support quickly. Children are encouraged and supported to learn and enjoy activities that give them confidence and positive self-esteem.
27. Children aged 16 and over who live in supported accommodation have their support needs appropriately met. Planning for independence with young people is based on a comprehensive understanding of their needs. Carefully planned accommodation meetings identify what support young people require to enable them to transition to independent living. Young people's records show that supervision is regular and reflective when plans need to change. PAs become involved with young people in good time to enable them to work alongside social workers to support young people until they reach adulthood.
28. Management oversight is not sufficiently robust for the very small number of young people living in unregistered children's homes. While children are making positive progress, are visited by their social workers and are participating in their statutory reviews, their records do not reflect good enough oversight from operational or strategic managers. Children's risk assessments have only recently been completed and children's records do not demonstrate that there has been regular supervision.
29. Children are well matched to their foster carers. Foster carers work successfully with partner agencies to support each child to settle quickly into their new foster home. Foster carers build positive relationships with the children and ensure that they are integral members of their families. As a result, children develop a strong sense of belonging and placement stability is good. Foster carers speak highly of the service. They feel very supported by their supervising

social workers and involved in the development of resources. Connected carers are supported by dedicated teams who provide a specialist service.

30. Children with a plan for adoption live with adoptive carers who meet their needs well. Consideration is given to what support children and adoptive carers need and, where necessary, additional therapeutic support is made available. Well-presented life-story work captures many of the child's experiences. This life-story work is enriched by sensitive later-life letters completed by children's social workers. The local authority works effectively with the Regional Adoption Agency to ensure that there is a suitable choice and number of trained and supported adopters to meet the needs of Walsall children.
31. Care leavers receive good support and help from managers and PAs. PAs work diligently to advocate on behalf of care leavers to ensure that they receive the best support to move safely towards independence. Most pathway plans are well written, jointly with young people, sometimes over several visits and at the young person's pace. PAs are passionate about their young people and talk with great pride about their achievements. PAs 'go the extra distance' to improve and enhance life chances for them.
32. Care leavers would welcome more practical support in preparation for leaving care and coping with emotional difficulties. For the large majority of young people, risk is assessed well to ensure that care leavers feel safe and stay safe. Young people told inspectors that they can readily access advice, support and guidance to help them to move towards managing their own tenancies. During the pandemic, PAs and managers ensured that care leavers had additional emotional and practical help.
33. Care leavers are encouraged and supported to access education, employment and training. Support for care leavers to stay in education, employment or training is a strength of the virtual school. Young people who wish to attend university are provided with good financial and ongoing emotional support and suitable accommodation. Care leavers appreciate the fact that PAs go above and beyond to help them find the right course, job or apprenticeship. Financial assistance is provided for those young people who need it to travel to interviews or to buy new clothes and equipment.
34. Care leavers know their rights and entitlements, and they also understand their life histories. They are provided with copies of key documents and know they can access their records and information when they are ready. PAs demonstrate an understanding of the risks of exploitation and vulnerability of care leavers. They discuss and offer care leavers emotional and mental health support.

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

35. Senior leaders, managers and staff demonstrate a culture of continuous learning, self-awareness and commitment to improving services for children.

There has been a conscious drive by a stable senior leadership team to deliver the Walsall Right 4 Children transformation programme, implemented since September 2018. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, senior leaders have been determined and are successful in implementing service improvements. While COVID-19 has meant that some areas of transformation have been slower to implement than others, progress has picked up pace and there are tangible and sustainable improvements in the delivery of services to children.

36. Senior leaders have embraced and delivered new initiatives and plans consistently based on the views of children, their families and workforce. The HAF programme, the Big Conversation, the views of children in care and care leavers that feed into the corporate parenting board, and the workforce health check provide leaders with a wealth of information that they use to inform plans to target service delivery and change. This transformation is complemented by comprehensive performance information and significant analysis of the needs of children and their families in each of the four localities in Walsall.
37. There is a strong corporate commitment and investment in children's services from the chief executive, lead member and other members to implement Walsall Council's priorities for children. As a result, there is tangible progress and benefits for children, their families and the workforce. There has been a significant reduction in social work caseloads so social workers can spend more time with children and their families. Workforce stability is good and results in fewer changes of social workers for children. The corporate parenting board was given a challenge by care leavers to set up a home with everything they may need when becoming an adult by using the care leaver grant income. As a result of this challenge, an increase in funding for the care leaver grant was agreed.
38. Senior leaders' visibility and support are appreciated by staff, who value the regular communication through newsletter updates and engagement in staff groups. For example, the all-staff conference week provides an opportunity for all staff to come together to focus on and discuss practice. Senior leaders are described by workers as approachable, and staff told inspectors that change is managed well, both in relation to the pandemic and service changes. Staff like working for Walsall and talked of a positive atmosphere where leaders are fair yet challenging.
39. The implementation of the strength-based practice model and specialist multidisciplinary professionals in the locality safeguarding and support teams have accelerated the developments and improvements in partnership working at both a strategic and operational level. As a result, many children and their families receive appropriate and skilled multi-agency wraparound support and services that significantly improve children's circumstances and reduce risks.

40. Senior leaders have deliberately focused on and developed strong relationships with partners. Examples of this are visible in the MASH, including the domestic abuse and child exploitation triage meetings, and with FLASH CAMHS supporting children in care with their emotional and mental health and well-being. In addition, Cafcass reports a positive and collaborative working environment.
41. There is significant investment in and value placed on children's education. Senior leaders have ensured that there is robust oversight of vulnerable children as a result of strong partnership working with schools through new policies and positive relationships with families. Councillors and senior leaders have made a clear commitment to provide the resources needed for the virtual school to fulfil its new statutory duty to support all vulnerable children.
42. There is tangible progress in the implementation of most recommendations from the previous inspection in 2017. In the last two years, there has been a specific focus on improving the identification, support and intervention for children at risk of exploitation. There is now a stronger offer, through an all-age exploitation strategy from a multi-agency partnership. There is targeted support and improvement in the number of care leavers accessing education, employment and training and social workers prioritise life-story work for children so that they can understand their journey in care.
43. There is effective partnership working between the local authority and the Regional Adoption Agency. Managers are forward-thinking, and monitoring is regular and robust. Senior leaders are reflective in their approach to issues that arise to improve practice and work collaboratively so that adopters and children have positive experiences and make good progress. In addition, managers have implemented significant changes to the fostering service. Progress is being made to drive up standards and ensure that there is a significant operational overview of the impact of experiences for children.
44. There has been insufficient progress in strategic and operational management oversight of children living in private fostering arrangements since the previous inspection. Management oversight and intervention to raise awareness of partners and staff of private fostering arrangements remain underdeveloped. Senior leaders know that there is more work to be done in ensuring that children living in these arrangements receive the right support, and while there is a revised action plan, it is not yet demonstrating its effectiveness or showing improvements for children.
45. Senior leaders have given thoughtful consideration to learning from good practice, performance information and locality analysis, to influence and develop changes and improvements to service provision for children and their families. As a result, leaders know the local and community needs of children well and have implemented significant changes to how services are targeted and delivered to best meet local need.

46. The quality assurance framework is comprehensive, giving senior leaders and operational managers oversight of the quality of practice through children's journey audits and performance information. Children's journey audit reports are well written, and they provide senior leaders with detailed analysis of the themes and key findings across five priority practice areas. Social workers are positive about their audit experience. They understand and feel involved in the process and this supports their reflection and learning. Monthly performance reports and score cards give senior leaders a quick overview of performance, with graphs and appropriate analysis. This has led to completion of targeted audit activity to support learning.
47. Senior leaders have already identified the inconsistency in the recording of supervision and quality of management oversight. Children's records do not always reflect their current circumstances and some information is recorded late in their records. Social workers are confident that their team managers and senior leaders know children's circumstances well. While inspectors agree with this, capturing this oversight in children's records needs improvement. This also applies to children looked after living in unregistered children's homes.
48. Learning and development for staff are prioritised and staff value this investment. Staff appreciate the many learning opportunities, such as online courses and workshops, and the investment in their well-being and career opportunities. Newly qualified social workers report that they have received regular supervision and good induction support from managers throughout the pandemic.

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