

Inspection of Warwickshire County Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 22 November to 3 December 2021

Lead inspector: Alison Smale, Her Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
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| 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 and families in Warwickshire benefit from consistently good quality services. Services have improved since the inspection in 2017, when they were judged to require improvement overall. Leaders are determined to continue the trajectory of improvement, building on strong partnerships and routinely taking children's views into account as part of service development. Children and families have access to a wide range of helpful services at an early stage, which make a real difference to their lives. Social workers listen carefully to children and make sure that children's views inform decision-making. They build trusting relationships with families, giving parents confidence to develop their parenting skills. When children come into care, they are placed within their wider family if this is possible and in their best interests. Most children in care live in long-term homes and make good progress. Care leavers are supported well to live independently, developing confidence and skills to assist them into adulthood.

Leaders have implemented a wide range of measures to ensure that children's needs are met well. They have a sound understanding of the quality of frontline practice and, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been tenacious in securing resources and ensuring that services continue to improve. As a result, social workers have continued to support vulnerable children well.

What needs to improve?

- The application of thresholds to escalate statutory involvement to a strategy discussion at the 'front door' when the criteria are met.
- Ensuring that plans routinely include timescales for action.
- Oversight and decisions for children in placements with connected carers that have not been approved.
- Achieving a consistently high quality of practice for disabled children.

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

1. Children and families in Warwickshire benefit from a clearly defined and accessible early help offer, ensuring that they receive support services when needed. An integral part of this is the Family Information Service, which signposts families to services effectively and provides helpful information. When children's needs escalate, children are referred for a social work assessment.
2. Senior managers have strengthened the arrangements to manage contacts and referrals to ensure that they are timely and effective. The integrated front door, composed of three hubs, operates cohesively and efficiently, providing a clear structure for allocation and completion of work. Strong relationships with partner agencies ensure that information is shared and action agreed to support and improve the circumstances of children and families, such as an agreement with schools to provide children with counselling and preventative work around exploitation. Consent from parents to share information between agencies is sought when necessary.
3. Domestic abuse contacts are managed well through a daily triage meeting with the police and social care within the multi-agency safeguarding hub. Partner agencies consider a wide range of factors, such as the family history and the impact on the child, so that if patterns emerge, even if the risks are considered to be low, consideration is given to referring the family for early help support to prevent further escalation.
4. Managers provide clear direction and regular oversight to inform decision-making and planning. When serious safeguarding concerns arise, action is taken to ensure the immediate safety of children. In a small number of cases, strategy discussions were not held when there was a risk of significant harm. This resulted from a focus on working with the parent to achieve resolution, rather than full consideration of the potential risks to the child. For these children, information was shared, and safety plans put in place, but a subsequent review of any pattern of concerns would not highlight that the threshold of a risk of significant harm had previously been met.
5. Effective arrangements are in place to respond to concerns about vulnerable children out of office hours, following a significant increase in capacity in that service. A strong interface between out-of-hours services, partner agencies and

children's social care services ensures that information is readily available for daytime social workers to continue with further work.

6. Initial response teams complete comprehensive assessments for children, informed by research, and which consider any risks and concerns and their impact on children. Information from partner agencies strengthens overall analysis and planning. Children are actively involved and their views, along with those of their parents, inform the assessment. Direct help for families is offered if required, with a clear focus on achieving sustainable progress for children. Help given to families is proportionate to the level of need. Social workers are skilled at working with parents, and assessments include consideration of possible factors that may affect their capacity to change, such as disguised compliance.
7. Children and young people are made safer by effective multi-agency arrangements. When children are already in receipt of a service, the application of thresholds for holding strategy meetings and initiating section 47 (child protection) enquiries is appropriate. Meetings are well attended by partner agencies, enabling effective information-sharing that results in robust decision-making and actions. Section 47 enquiries are effective and timely, with clear recording of the rationale for next steps.
8. Multi-agency decision-making at initial child protection conferences is clear and child-centred. Partner agencies share information effectively, listening to the views of parents while maintaining a primary focus on the child. Independent chairs provide a clear evaluation of the concerns, needs and strengths, but timescales within the child's outline plan are not always specified.
9. Children in need and child protection plans evidence progress in meeting needs, and many children and families benefit from the wide range of support services and interventions available to them. These include the Different Futures project and the Caring Dads group, enabling parents to have insight into their behaviour and to establish more constructive relationships with their children. Generally, although plans are detailed and most are appropriately focused, too many actions lack timescales to monitor progress and to hold professionals and families to account.
10. Creative and regular direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with their social workers and family support workers. The voices of children are evident in plans. Children, young people and families have timely access to advocates. Social workers are sensitive to the diversity and culture of children and their families and have good access to interpreters if required.
11. Practice for disabled children is variable. Many children receive an effective service, with assessments and plans which reflect their complex needs and draw on information from all agencies involved. However, others do not have up-to-date assessments or chronologies, which senior leaders recognise is due to higher workloads in this team. Social workers within the disabled children's teams are supported to complete direct work through specialist training. They each have kitbags with resources that support sensory engagement with children.

12. Skilled and experienced social work practitioners manage allegations against staff working with children. They exercise suitable professional curiosity to ensure that the management of allegations is robust. Clear recording processes support these practitioners to ensure that cases are tracked effectively to avoid delay.
13. Senior managers have good oversight of children subject to pre-proceedings activity. Early consideration of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline takes place when children's circumstances are not improving. The decision-making panel closely tracks cases in pre-proceedings to minimise drift and delay for children. Practice in pre-proceedings is effective in diverting children from care; nearly half of the families at the pre-proceedings stage make sufficient changes in order to care for their child safely at home.
14. Checks on children missing education are robust and children are located as soon as possible. Senior managers have good oversight of electively home educated children, providing helpful guidance to families who take this route.
15. Children who are at high risk of exploitation are identified well and supported to enable risks to reduce. Return home interviews, when children have been missing from home, are thorough and highly child-focused, providing rich information to inform future work with children, and wider risk management.
16. Young people aged 16 to 17 years old who present as homeless receive good support. They are made aware of their rights regarding accommodation, through discussion with workers and literature that is written in user-friendly language, and they are supported to return to their families if it is safe to do so.

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

17. Decisions for children to come into care are timely, well considered and based on comprehensive risk assessments. Senior managers have effective oversight of these decisions. Social workers consider placing children within their wider family before placing them with foster carers. They consider children's needs well to ensure a successful match with foster carers. Brothers and sisters are placed together whenever possible. Care proceedings are initiated appropriately to safeguard children. Applications to court are supported by detailed assessments and effective plans to keep children safe. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are engaged well in the formulation of final care plans.
18. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children come into care appropriately and benefit from a specialist service. Senior managers have responded swiftly to accommodate an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who were originally believed to be adults and placed by the Home Office in local hotels. Social workers acted with compassion and care to assess these children and to ensure that they were placed in suitable accommodation and their immediate needs met quickly.
19. Despite variability in written plans, children make positive progress in care. Stronger plans are more detailed, individually tailored to address emerging needs and to enable the child's permanence plan to progress. Others lack sufficient

detail for individual children to enable professionals to fully understand their needs. Some plans contain many actions but without clear timescales, meaning that there is limited sense of prioritisation or accountability for professionals.

20. Children who return home to their parents do so safely as a result of purposeful work, both before and after reunification. This is assisted by specialist services that have been established by senior leaders, such as the systemic family therapy team and the 'STAY' adolescent team. For those children who are at home on statutory orders, their care plans are actively reviewed to secure permanence at the earliest opportunity.
21. Children benefit from regular review of their care plans, called All About Me meetings. Social workers prepare an up-to-date assessment prior to the review to help to inform decision-making. Children participate in their reviews and some are proactively supported to contribute to or chair their meetings. Children have access to independent advocates who actively seek their wishes and feelings and support them in meetings if appropriate. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, reviews have been held online. Following feedback from children, practice is moving towards a hybrid model, although individual consultation with children about their views on this is not sufficiently clear on files. IROs write clear letters to children to explain what was agreed at the meeting. This helps children to understand the decisions made about them while in care. Actions are specific to children's needs but do not consistently include timescales.
22. Effective life-story and direct work is undertaken with children to help them to understand their histories. A specialist team has been established, which is helping many children to create life-story books. Social workers know their children well and have developed positive relationships with them. Social workers have meaningful discussions with children about plans and their future, with good use of direct work tools to understand children's wishes and feelings.
23. Children in care who are at risk of exploitation or go missing receive an effective response, with partner agencies taking a shared responsibility for actively supporting children and taking protective action when necessary. Return home interviews with children are timely, child-focused and skilfully undertaken, helping to understand and reduce further risk.
24. The health needs of children are well considered in assessments, plans and reviews. For some children, there are delays in receiving appointments for their health assessment. However, physical health needs and immunisations are addressed quickly through universal services. While initial child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) assessments are mostly completed in a timely way, children wait too long for specialist interventions. Additionally, 16- to 17-year-old children in care and care leavers cannot easily access formal mental health assessment and support from either CAMHS or adult mental health services. Workers try to bridge this gap by accessing specialist voluntary and private sector services for counselling, but there is a gap in bespoke mental health support, which means that some children with specific mental health needs wait too long for help.

25. The virtual school works well with its partner schools to secure good-quality education for children in care. Staff at the virtual school take timely and effective action to improve pupils' academic outcomes, attendance and behaviour. Most children, since coming into care, make good gains in their learning from their starting points. When a young person experiences difficulty, staff at the virtual school intervene quickly and provide effective support. However, careers guidance is variable and not consistently strong. Senior leaders have a plan to address this. The quality of personal education plans is typically good and sets out the provision that pupils need.
26. Children benefit from stable, long-term placements which meet their needs and help them to make positive progress in their lives. Most children are placed within the county, but the minority placed out of the area live in homes or settings that are well matched to their needs. This includes disabled children and those in residential care. Disabled children in care are usually supported to remain in placements which meet their needs into adulthood. However, for some of these children, transition planning is neither clear nor timely and this creates additional anxiety for them and for their carers.
27. Introductions for children to their adoptive families are well considered and carefully planned at a pace that is right for the child. A range of direct work tools are used effectively to complete life-story work and books for children with a plan for adoption. This means that children have a full understanding of their life histories and the decisions that have been made to afford them permanence.
28. Children are supported to live with extended family members whenever possible and if it is in their best interests. Viability assessments are completed to inform initial placement decisions and to ensure that arrangements are safe for children, which are then followed up with comprehensive assessments. For children on care orders living with family, social workers proactively support carers to seek special guardianship orders (SGOs) to promote family life and to reduce unnecessary social work interventions. Senior leaders have invested in additional SGO support within Warwickshire. This has strengthened opportunities for permanence for children.
29. A very small cohort of children live with family members who do not wish to be assessed, or who have withdrawn from or been unsuccessful in being approved as a connected carer. While most of these children make progress and the placements are approved by the court, it is not sufficiently clear what action is being taken by senior managers to increase support to these children while they live in such placements.
30. Assessments of foster carers are clear and analytical. Thorough scrutiny of assessments enables the fostering panel to make informed recommendations about suitability. Once approved, foster carers are well supported by suitably qualified staff. This is further enhanced by a comprehensive training programme that enables foster carers to understand and respond to children's individual needs. Senior managers have implemented alternative, online options in all elements of the service to prevent delay and isolation of applicants and foster carers in response to COVID-19.

31. Warwickshire is the host authority for the regional adoption agency. Strong quality assurance processes, operating in conjunction with the authority's own internal monitoring systems, provide regular opportunities to reflect on and develop practice. This supports positive outcomes for children and adopters.
32. Care leavers benefit from a recently reviewed comprehensive care leaver offer. Once personal advisers begin working with care leavers when they are aged 17 years old, they provide committed, consistent and purposeful support. They form positive relationships which help the young people to feel valued and to develop skills and confidence to assist their maturation into adulthood.
33. Personal advisers supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people demonstrate insight into the experiences and trauma that they have endured. Placements are well matched, offering the support needed for the child or young person to begin to establish themselves. The children and young people are supported to develop friendships and to become involved in community activities. Many have experienced considerable trauma and there are significant delays for them in accessing formal mental health assessments and treatment. Personal advisers are creative in plugging this shortfall by seeking alternative specialist services.
34. Care leavers are offered appropriate education, training or employment opportunities and they are supported to succeed. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, personal advisers are proactive in supporting them into education or career pathways. Some care leavers have made a great success of apprenticeship opportunities within the council and have gone on to secure permanent jobs. They have also become articulate, powerful advocates and role models for the wider care leaver community.
35. The vast majority of care leavers live in suitable and safe accommodation. However, the quality and availability of accommodation are variable. Young people receive practical and emotional support that enables them to develop their independence skills. When necessary, intensive support is provided, and some care leavers access a comprehensive pre- and post-tenancy training programme via the National House Project. The House project successfully supports young people to maintain their tenancies and live independently, which is valued by young people. A relatively small number of care leavers 'stay put' with their foster carers. Despite the increase in allowances for 'staying put' carers, there are financial barriers to young people staying with carers, who are sometimes deterred by the sharp reduction in financial support, thereby continuing to limit access to the continuity of care this affords young people.

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

36. Senior leaders have developed a culture and an organisational ethos that value children and families and they aspire to do the very best for them. The strengths and relationship-based social work model is embedded, with actions taken to improve services and practice having a tangible impact for many vulnerable children in Warwickshire. Senior leaders recognise that while working to

transform and improve services, some aspects of practice need to improve more quickly, such as threshold decision-making at the front door, the quality of plans for children and access to specialist mental health services. They have been proactive in developing detailed insight and knowledge about gaps in service provision and they have embraced practice models to address needs and to develop more effective services for children. There are numerous examples of how services have been strengthened, or new types of services introduced, across all areas of practice, that have provided tangible benefits to children and their families.

37. Leaders have responded determinedly to the challenges brought about by the pandemic and the increase in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, to do what is best and right for children.
38. Senior leaders, including the director of children's services, the chief executive, leader and lead member, listen and learn from children, staff and carers when planning service development. The corporate parenting panel challenges senior managers and partners, and enables the voices of children to be heard. The children in care council and care leaver forum are influential groups that have contributed to the development of many services and policies, including the service structure.
39. Strategic partnership working is strong. Leaders are actively engaged in a range of partnerships which have taken forward integrated approaches to early help, the front door, child exploitation and work with the courts to develop new protocols, for example to strengthen opportunities for earlier discharge of care orders for children at home with parents.
40. Leaders understand the organisation well. Their comprehensive self-evaluation is accurate and reflects the areas for improvement identified during the inspection. Leaders benefit from a comprehensive array of performance information and quality assurance activities. Leaders had already identified the areas for improvement and have appropriate plans in place.
41. Supervision varies in quality. Social workers themselves find supervision and group team discussions helpful, enabling them to reflect on their practice. In teams where supervision is stronger, social workers benefit from reflective discussions, with actions from previous sessions followed up. In other teams, supervision records indicate limited discussion, and actions on casework do not align sufficiently with the child's plan. Leaders are already taking action to improve the quality of supervision.
42. Social workers benefit from a range of training opportunities which support improved practice and link to the practice model. Staff enjoy working for Warwickshire. They are positive about the impact of changes made to improve the service and how well this has been managed. Good practice and success are celebrated in Warwickshire, both through internal awards such as the apprenticeship of the year, the chief executive award won by the initial response team and strengthening families, as well as external awards.

43. Workloads are manageable, enabling social workers to have the time to work effectively with children and families. Caseloads have reduced, despite increased demand for services, in part by increasing the number of social workers above those within the authority's structure to ensure that children receive good services.

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