

Inspection of Central Bedfordshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 January 2022

Lead inspector: Margaret Burke, 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

Central Bedfordshire continues to provide good services for its children. Leaders have created a strength-based culture, with ongoing investment in early help and additional family support services enabling families to access support, often without the need for statutory intervention. Strengths and improvements are evident across the full range of social work practice. The local authority has sustained effective services for children in need of help and protection. Support for children in care and care leavers is now better than at the last inspection, with support for care leavers particularly strong. Changes since the last inspection within the senior leadership team have been managed seamlessly, minimising disruption to services.

A skilled and well-trained workforce continues to be a key strength. Workforce stability means that children benefit from workers who know them well and help to support positive changes in their lives. This crucial support has continued throughout the past two years of COVID-19. Leaders and workers have a good understanding of its impact, and the difficulties children and families have faced. They have adapted their responses well, recognising that for some children and young people life has felt less safe. The support provided, in particular addressing children's mental health needs and assisting care leavers, has helped children and young people and their families to cope better during this difficult period.

In some discrete areas, practice is not rigorous enough to ensure that the needs and welfare of all children remain paramount. In particular, there is a lack of

thoroughness in response to some initial contacts and in some children's cases where child protection investigations do not lead to a child protection conference. Some children do not progress through the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) at a pace that is right for them. A small number remain too long in neglectful situations without their needs being prioritised and met.

What needs to improve?

- The appraisal of information, to inform decision-making about contacts and child protection enquiries, to ensure that children receive the support they need at the earliest opportunity.
- The timeliness, oversight and effective use of the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO, to drive progress and make improvements at sufficient pace for the child.
- The consistency in recording key decisions and changes in children's plans on case records.

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

1. The council's commitment to providing effective early intervention to children and families is evident in an array of locally-based community support and advice services. This, with effective partnership working, enables children and families to benefit from intensive early help and support. Good targeting of support, for example to vulnerable teenagers, young carers and younger children, helps families to build their resilience. Thresholds for intervention by early help services are well understood and applied appropriately. Children get timely and proportionate support. For many children, this support prevents their needs escalating and results in positive experiences for them and their parents.
2. Decision-making for most contacts and referrals is appropriate, with consistent application of thresholds. Children in need of help or protection are seen quickly by social workers to gain a full picture of their and their family's needs. Most children are seen alone by social workers to gain a full picture of their needs and to understand their views. Timely safeguarding action is taken where there is a risk of harm. Support is quickly put in place while assessments are ongoing.
3. For a small number of children for whom it is less clear what help is needed, professionals are not always considering the information presented quickly and thoroughly enough to direct children to appropriate support. Feedback to referrers is not always given promptly.
4. Most children's assessments contain clear management direction, and are comprehensive and of a good quality. They routinely draw on information from relevant partner agencies, children themselves, family members and others who know them and understand their needs. Their conclusions and recommendations demonstrate an understanding of concerns and lead to plans which support the desired outcome. Unborn babies, for example, benefit from early and comprehensive assessments and planning which explore well how to protect them. Support is provided to their parents and all options within the

wider family considered if it is not safe for the child to remain with their parents. Most assessments and plans focus on the things that matter most to children. But some, particularly review assessments, are less detailed, lack focus on what still needs to change and do not fully consider how the lack of progress may impact on children.

5. When there are serious concerns about children's safety, strategy meetings are quickly convened. These meetings are well attended and thorough in their discussions and recommendations. Child protection enquiries are appropriately initiated. When robust enquiries are undertaken, the risks faced by children are clearly identified and rigorous safety plans are developed. A small number of child protection enquiries lack detail and the work undertaken is not comprehensive enough, for example, to explain the reasons for closing social work involvement. While this does not result in children being left at risk of harm, decisions and plans for these children are less effective.
6. Children and families are well supported to help their situations improve. Families who need it are provided with more intensive support, including additional help at weekends and evenings. This intervention helps professionals to monitor risk, while enabling parents to make tangible improvements in the care that they provide to their children. Children are also well supported with additional community services and targeted intervention through their schools.
7. The progress of children in need and those subject to child protection plans is reviewed at regular intervals, through well-attended core group and child in need review meetings. In most cases families attend these meetings, are central to the reviewing process and are involved in improving their children's lives. The level of support they receive is appropriately adjusted if their situations change, either escalated or stepped down to child in need or early help services.
8. Disabled children receive comprehensive assessments which lead to strong, child-focused plans. They benefit from stable relationships, developed over time with workers in specialist teams. Creative work is undertaken to capture children's views, wishes and feelings and to provide opportunities for them to have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Plans are made early to support young people's successful transition to appropriate adult services. Social workers persist when addressing needs, working in partnership, advocating, and challenging where required, to ensure that children's needs are well met. Children generally make good progress, and their plans are regularly reviewed.
9. The PLO process is now being used to support many more children and their families to make effective changes at the pre-proceedings stage, enabling them to maintain the care of their children. The number of children who are subject to court proceedings is low and continues to reduce, but the complexity of their needs is recognised. While this reflects the effectiveness of early help and social work intervention with many families, some are remaining at the pre-proceedings stage for too long. While professionals' continuing efforts to support children to stay within their families are commendable, and many benefit as a result, a small number remain in situations of neglect for too long.

Some timescales for professional assessment have been affected by COVID-19. Notwithstanding this, the progress made by some children's carers is too slow for their children's needs to be appropriately met. In these situations, while ongoing support is evident, tracking is too focused on the adults, and it is not ensuring that progress and improvements are made for children at the pace that is right for them.

10. Social workers and support workers maintain regular contact with children. When children and families are reluctant to engage, managers provide effective support and guidance to help workers persist in their attempts to make meaningful contact with them. Workers demonstrate impressive skills in their efforts to hear and understand children's views, successfully using a variety of tools to help them better understand their situations, while also providing them with emotional support.
11. Multi-agency awareness has increased the identification of children who go missing from home or care and are vulnerable to exploitation. Partner agencies understand risks and their responsibilities to act and help protect children. Coordinated and impactful safety plans are put in place for vulnerable children. Joint working and effective communication with the police help to identify alleged perpetrators. As a result, the police are better able to be proactive, to issue child abduction warning notices and to take other action to reduce risk to children. The contextual safeguarding approach is embedded, with clear disruption plans developed to reduce the risk of harm to vulnerable children.
12. Support to keep missing children safe has considerably improved since the last inspection. Children who go missing from home or from care receive a swift offer of return home interviews from a dedicated, stable team of workers, who have built strong relationships with those who repeatedly go missing. Children almost always take up the offer. Insights from these interviews and information provided by other agencies are used well to understand push and pull factors, to analyse risks and to develop safety plans. When children go missing frequently or for longer periods of time, strategy meetings are held to formulate multi-agency plans, to help protect them.
13. Leaders have oversight of children who leave school to become electively home educated (EHE) and of children who are missing education (CME). The number of children registering as EHE is increasing year on year. The EHE and CME teams work closely together and take appropriate action when needed, to ensure that children receive a suitable education. The number of children missing education long term continues to decline.

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

14. Decision-making for children coming into care is appropriate. Brothers and sisters are routinely placed together when it is assessed to be in their best interests.

15. Most children in care live in homes that meet their needs. However, achieving placement sufficiency continues to be challenging for the local authority, with limited choice leading to some children being placed out of area at a long distance. Services and support to these children have improved since the last inspection, and their health and education needs are now well supported. Good consideration is given to help children maintain friendships and family connections. However, these distant out-of-area placements still present challenges, with some children enduring very long daily journeys to maintain their education.
16. The local authority has struggled to find suitable homes with immediate availability for a very small number of children. This has resulted in one child being placed in an unregistered children's home for a short period of time. Leaders maintained good oversight of this child's care, ensuring she was well supported and that a suitable home was quickly found. In another example, difficulties identifying specialist residential care meant an unplanned return to parents' care in difficult circumstances for one child. Leaders are fully aware of these difficulties and have committed resources to increase local placements.
17. Intensive help is provided to support children to return to parents. Most children return home in a planned way, with ongoing support under child in need arrangements. Parents are well supported to address previous concerns, improve their parenting and help their children to do well in their care.
18. For some children, the plan to return home is managed within court proceedings, with contingencies and parallel planning put in place to ensure timely moves at the conclusion of proceedings. While plans for children are generally good, decisions made for them are not always clearly explained in their case records and changes in plans are not always ratified by independent reviewing officers (IROs). This means that if an individual requests access to their records in the future, information about when and why decisions were made may not be available to them.
19. Children are well supported by their social workers and carers. Workers' visits to children are purposeful and in response to need rather than to meet minimum timescales. Social workers make determined efforts to get to know children, and their needs, challenges and likes. Social workers and other support workers undertake effective direct work with children. Inspectors saw numerous examples of excellent direct-work practice. For one child, a book was created to help him to understand plans for visits to see his mother and to reduce his anxiety. The book went so far as to introduce him to his mother's new cat. Sensitive work was undertaken by another social worker to support children to remain with their long-term foster carer following the death of one of their carers.
20. Reviews for children in care are of a high quality and focus on ensuring positive outcomes for them. When possible, children attend their meetings and are supported well to contribute. Reviews are well attended by all relevant partners. The minutes are clear and concise and IROs provide appropriate challenge when actions have not progressed for children. Plans reflect things

that children say are important to them. High-quality advocacy support is widely available, and extends to disabled children. This helps to ensure children's voices are heard in a range of meetings.

21. Excellent support is provided to foster carers by experienced, skilled and child-focused supervising social workers. High-quality training helps foster carers to provide good care for children. However, delays in the early stages of the fostering assessment process and in the timeliness of the assessment of family and friend carers can impact on the timeliness of decisions and the availability of placements for children. A small number of family and friend placements involving children within the court arena are not progressed quickly enough. Leaders are aware of this oversight and have instigated action to ensure that these carers are formally considered for approval at the next available fostering panel. Once foster carers are approved, ongoing good-quality support is provided to both them and the children in their care. Similarly, family and friends' carers receive effective support and training, ensuring they are well placed to meet the needs of children in their care. When carers seek to become special guardians, support is tailored for each child, to enable these arrangements to succeed.
22. The recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters is done well. The matching of children with potential carers is very carefully considered. The approach taken by the skilled and experienced social workers involved gives prospective adopters confidence in the process. Prospective adopters are actively choosing Central Bedfordshire. Adopters and foster carers are unanimous in their praise of Central Bedfordshire, the work of the teams and the offer of support.
23. The head of the virtual school is ambitious for children. The council's investment in expanding the team over the last two years has enabled better coordination of education services for children in care. Rigorous quality assurance of personal education plans (PEPs) has ensured more consistent completion. All PEPs contain the essential information to meet statutory requirements and are reviewed every term as a minimum.
24. Children in care are encouraged to access leisure activities that support their interests and hobbies. Health needs are considered well, and appointments are tracked in care plans to ensure they take place within timescales. The emotional and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers are identified and well supported.
25. Effective support is provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Careful consideration of cultural and faith needs helps to make newly arrived children feel welcomed and supported in their new homes. Workers' awareness of the possible impact of trauma during childhood or travel means that appropriate support and counselling are offered. The progress made by some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is hugely impressive. The ongoing support that they receive from social workers and personal advisers is having a clear impact on the opportunities that they have in pursuing their education.

26. Since the last inspection, the authority has focused particularly on ensuring children's need for a permanent home is considered in a timely manner. As a result, the vast majority of children in long-term care now have permanence decisions and are living with their long-term agreed carers. A permanence tracking panel reviews those children who have not yet had a permanence decision to ensure that any issues are resolved as quickly as possible. Children feel secure, knowing that they can remain long term in their homes with their carers and confidently integrate in their carers' families and lives.
27. Care leavers in Central Bedfordshire receive excellent support. Social workers and personal advisers have a good understanding of the complexities of young people's lives. They identify creative ways to support them and keep in regular contact with them. Plans are co-written with young people in their own words and are meaningful, based on the things that are important to them. As a result, young people benefit from relationships with workers who are emotionally invested in them. There is a strong sense of ensuring that the support offered must be 'good enough for my own child'. This relational approach is underpinned by a comprehensive offer for care leavers, supporting their accommodation, leisure, work and training, health and mental health needs. Workers explore and support care leavers' cultural needs and family relationships. They identify and respond appropriately to any risk.
28. Care leavers are given choice and the opportunity to remain with their carers in 'staying put' arrangements. They are supported to move on to independent accommodation when they are ready and at a time that is believed to be right for them. Close relationships with housing colleagues support young people to seek their own accommodation when they are ready. The quality of accommodation is good, most of it new-build flats.
29. Most care leavers are actively engaged in education, employment or training. Leaders accept that too few care leavers progress to apprenticeships. Nevertheless, the number of young people going on to higher education is increasing year on year and effective partnerships with local colleges and employers enable care leavers to pursue their goals and ambitions.

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

30. The commitment of the chief executive officer (CEO) and councillors to children is evident. Children's services are central to the council's agenda and children's needs are recognised and prioritised. Despite the need for efficiency savings in the challenging financial climate for many local authorities, the council continues to invest in services for children, with ongoing investments in early help and support for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders have recruited to additional key roles to strengthen services and respond to demand. The council has committed support to increase the number of in-house foster carers and the number of local placements.
31. Key partners speak of strong, mature relationships at both strategic and operational levels. The local safeguarding partnership and pan-Bedfordshire

arrangements support cross-authority cooperation, with resources pooled effectively. The Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service and the judiciary report good relationships, which are responsive and open to discussion even when there are different views. Effective partnerships have been established between schools and the local authority. School leaders speak positively about the advice and support they receive from social workers and the virtual school.

32. The council and officers recognise the potential of children in care and care leavers and that, as leaders, they are responsible for ensuring they are supported to do well. A recent review of the corporate parenting panel and the involvement of the Children in Care Council (CICC) have led to developments in the approach to corporate parenting. Leaders are engaging strategic partners in housing, leisure, health and other service areas in improving opportunities for children in care and care leavers. As joint chairs, young people from the CICC are fully involved in steering this new corporate parenting agenda. Actions are monitored and reviewed to ensure accountability and follow-up, so that children can be confident that questions they ask will be responded to.
33. Staff have access to an extensive array of learning opportunities and individualised programmes, over and above mandatory training for their professional development. Learning and development are used effectively and the impact is evident in the quality of work that is undertaken to help children.
34. Leaders have continued to strengthen arrangements for scrutinising the quality of practice. The auditing process, when done well, includes the views of children, parents and carers, and demonstrates effective social work reflection. This is providing managers with valuable insights into practice strengths and into the service areas which need development. Leaders accept that there is still more to do to increase the impact audits have on frontline casework.
35. Leaders have access to an array of performance data which tracks the progress of work and the timeliness and effectiveness of responses to children and families. This information is scrutinised by service managers, the CEO and lead members, with relevant information tabled for full council consideration. Progress is evident in many areas identified for improvement at the last inspection, including the timeliness of assessments, health assessments and checks, and the take-up of return home interviews for children following an episode of going missing. Team managers are using team performance data well, to track progression of work and to keep on top of expected timescales. While the authority knows itself well and has a sound grip on most areas of performance, there remains a need for more critical self-evaluation and challenge in those practice areas which are not progressing well.
36. Managers' oversight of practice is evident and effective in most aspects of children's journeys. Their positive steer and challenge to workers is helping to improve outcomes for many children. However, the oversight of some areas of practice where key decisions are made for children and young people is not always robust. Some contact decisions and child protection enquiries are not robust enough in ensuring relevant information is gathered and historical

information considered before decisions are made. The rationale for decisions is not always recorded. At the time of this inspection, leaders had recognised this need and already identified resources to strengthen managers' oversight of this work, securing funding for extra capacity.

37. The process for tracking and monitoring progress of work for children within the PLO is not robust enough to avoid drift and delay for children. Managers who have oversight of children in the pre-proceedings stage are not sufficiently assertive when progress is not achieved quickly enough for children. This is acknowledged by the senior leadership team, who have begun work with their legal colleagues to strengthen this aspect of practice.
38. Workers have been well supported during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working arrangements have changed, but the authority has adapted the support it provides to help staff to stay safe and maintain their focus on protecting children. Practitioners feel valued and invested in, with career pathways and good support to newly qualified staff. Manageable caseloads for the majority of workers allow them the time to build effective relationships with children and their families. The council's investment in a range of support services ensures social workers can draw on good resources in their work with families and make sure that children get the support they need. Regular supervision, accessible leaders and good peer support ensure workers have the tools to do their jobs well and promote the ongoing stability of the workforce.

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