

Inspection of Leeds local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 21 February to 4 March 2022

Lead inspector: Louise Hollick, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last inspection of Leeds City Council in 2018, services for children have remained outstanding in their overall effectiveness. Children benefit from consistently strong and creative social work delivered to an exceptionally high standard. Senior leaders and council members are unstinting in their efforts and ambitions for children to achieve their full potential. They harness highly effective partnership working and promote a culture across the city where children and young people are at its heart.

As one of the largest cities in the UK, Leeds has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The partnership reports that the impact of the pandemic has seen a rise in the numbers of families living in poverty, worsening health and well-being outcomes, and increased numbers of children in need of support. There has been a substantial increase in the number of children referred to children's social care, at a time of increased staff sickness and vacancy levels. This has driven up social worker caseloads and the complexity of children's needs and circumstances. For a small number of children in need of help and protection, there has been a lack of timely decision-making at key points in the child protection process. This means there has been a delay in children being considered at multi-agency meetings to consider risks and timely protective actions. Leaders are aware of this and have taken action to ensure that there are no longer delays for children awaiting child protection conferences.

Despite these pressures, Leeds has maintained a relentless focus on prioritising services and support to children and families. The restorative and relational practice model has been further embedded into practice. It is reinforced under the banner of 'child-friendly Leeds', with corporate support and investment that recognise that children living in Leeds are of the highest priority.

What needs to improve?

- Contingency planning in children's written plans.
- Consistent decision-making for strategy discussions.

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

1. Children and families benefit from well-established and extensive early help support. There is a broad and flexible range of early help and interventions available through cluster arrangements with schools and children's centres. Early help teams provide targeted support formulated with families to identify children's needs and families' strengths. When children's needs change, arrangements for step up and step down through early help are well embedded and understood. This means that children receive the right support and at the right time.
2. Referrals into the 'front door' safeguarding hub have increased substantially over the past year, partly as a result of increased demand from the pandemic. Partners who have concerns about children are encouraged to contact the hub via telephone, which enables professionals to have direct conversations with social workers in the front door safeguarding hub. This leads to a better quality of information-sharing at this early stage. Written referrals from other agencies are of more variable quality. The standard referral form is not consistently used across all partner agencies. This sometimes results in a lack of required information being shared and consent from parents is not consistently sought from them, which means that workers have to clarify further information. For the vast majority of referrals, this is done promptly and is not leading to delays in agreeing outcomes for children.
3. Children's needs and risks are identified promptly, and for most children there are timely actions that aim to support the reduction of risks to children. Management oversight of timeliness of response to referrals has been improved since the last focused visit, which identified this as an area for improvement. There is strong management oversight of referrals. Social workers are skilled and knowledgeable about what actions they need to take to ensure that they gather the right information to inform decision-making.
4. When children need a response out of hours, the emergency duty team provides a prompt and effective response. This ensures that urgent needs are responded to so that children are protected in the evenings and weekends.

5. When risks to children escalate, most children's needs are considered in multi-agency strategy meetings. Attendance of partner agencies has improved since the last focused visit and there is detailed information-sharing and appropriate decision-making in these meetings. Subsequent child protection enquiries are thorough, with a clear assessment of risk which then informs the next steps. For a small number of children, strategy meetings had not taken place, and although children had been seen by social workers, there was a delay in multi-agency information-sharing and progressing child protection enquiries. This inconsistent decision-making means that not all children benefit from prompt multi-agency consideration of their immediate safeguarding needs.
6. There have been delays for a significant number of children whose risks needed to be considered at initial child protection conferences. Senior leaders had identified this issue prior to this inspection, and put in place interim measures to safeguard these children while waiting for the initial conference to be held. However, inspectors found that a small minority of children had not received coordinated multi-agency planning or more frequent visits during this waiting period. At the time of the inspection, the delays to conferences have been resolved and children are now considered at child protection conferences without any undue delay.
7. The local authority designated officers have developed clear, solid processes to respond to allegations against professionals. There is swift and robust decision-making to ensure that plans are in place to safeguard children. There are good partnership arrangements and professional relationships to ensure that the right children are considered under this process.
8. Children's assessments are thorough and comprehensive. They are mostly timely, although there is acknowledgement from leaders that some assessments could be completed more quickly if they were briefer. Social workers understand the risks and protective factors for the child. Children's culture and identity are very well understood by social workers. This ensures that sensitive and tailored support and interventions are offered.
9. The Leeds model of practice, based on a restorative approach with families, is coherent and palpable throughout the services offered to children. Families are routinely offered family group conferencing (FGC) which harnesses purposeful support from extended families and friends to build strength around families and is helping to reduce risk to children. Children are seen frequently by their social workers. Social workers develop meaningful relationships with children and use the strength of the restorative, relational approach to really get to know their children and develop enduring relationships with them. Children also have access to advocacy services, which means that their views are consistently heard at key meetings to inform decision-making.
10. Disabled children benefit from very good quality assessments, plans and interventions, including good-quality short-break provision, residential placements and direct payments. Children who are privately fostered make

good progress and benefit from effective planning. They are visited regularly, and their wishes are heard.

11. Plans based on thorough information and developed alongside families provide good levels of support and interventions. Children and families receive a wide variety of support to mitigate against harm and risk, including input from domestic abuse services and parental mental health and substance and alcohol services, combined with a wealth of family support. This helps families to make and sustain changes so that children's circumstances improve. While social workers are able to describe contingency plans well, written plans do not reflect this detail.
12. There is rigorous management oversight of pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline, with timely decisions informed by robust assessments, including pre-birth assessments. Letters before proceedings provide a detailed understanding to parents about what is expected of them. Timely viability assessments of family members are completed so that children can benefit from being able to remain with their own family and with their brothers and sisters when this is in their best interests.
13. Children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation are identified and well supported. Multi-agency approaches to identifying and disrupting exploitation are effective. Most children at risk of exploitation benefit from comprehensive risk assessments which are updated and reviewed through the multi-agency vulnerable risk management panel. When children go missing, they are routinely offered a return home interview. These are thorough and gather information which is used to inform plans to keep children safe and to reduce further episodes of going missing.
14. Leaders are tenacious in identifying and locating children who are missing education. Staff contact schools and other agencies to make sure that these children are back on a school roll as soon as possible. This is resulting in increased numbers of children returning to education and a reduction in the number of children missing and whose whereabouts are unknown. There are checks to ensure that parents who elect to educate their children at home have a clear understanding of what is expected and that the education provided is suitable.

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

15. Children are brought into care through timely decision-making that is responsive to concerns of escalating risk. The wishes and feelings of children, and their parents, are clearly set out in good-quality assessments and applications to court. Delays are purposeful and are not detrimental to the welfare of children. Permanence panels chaired by senior managers provide an additional layer of scrutiny, and ensure a strong focus on understanding the child's journey in care to support effective permanence decision-making.

16. Social workers' relationships with children are a strength and children are visited regularly and seen alone. This gives children stability and helps them feel cared for and valued. It also ensures that plans are informed by children's views. Social workers have a real sense of pride when talking about children's achievements and are keen to celebrate their successes. Children are well supported in their interests and hobbies. This helps them develop positive life skills and enjoy their leisure time.
17. Children live in safe, secure and settled placements. They move only when it is safe to do so, and in line with their individual care plan. Social workers are tenacious in preparing transitional planning meetings to move children into their new placements. A large proportion of children in care live with extended family members under safely assessed kinship care arrangements. Children maintain meaningful relationships with their carers into adulthood through 'staying put' arrangements. Family time is carefully considered and adapted to meet the needs of children. When placements are under pressure, there is a range of agile support, including from the therapeutic social work team. This ensures timely packages of support to help provide stability for children to remain with their carers.
18. Care plans address children's needs comprehensively and are effectively reviewed within the required timescale by independent reviewing officers (IROs) who have enduring relationships with children and know them well. IROs visit children in their homes and ensure that children are listened to. Children are supported to attend their review meetings and access advocacy when needed.
19. Decisions for children to return home are based on a clear assessment of risk underpinned by a strong ethos that children should be brought up in their own families where it is safe to do so. When it is not possible for children to return home, parallel planning explores all options effectively, including kinship care. Viability assessments of family members are purposeful and supported by effective FGCs, which explore the nature of support available in genuine partnership with families. This enables children to maintain supportive relationships with their families even if they cannot live with them.
20. Life-story work, including the use of later life letters, is thoughtfully completed to a very high standard. Social workers can access support from the therapeutic social work team when conducting this work to ensure a sensitive and trauma-informed approach which puts the emotional needs of the child first.
21. Children's identity and cultural needs are well considered, including for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). UASC benefit from a specialist service where workers have a comprehensive understanding of their needs. UASC are frequently excelling in respect of their emotional well-being and educational achievements. Inspectors met and spoke to a group of unaccompanied young people who reported very positively about the support received on arrival in the UK, such as the welcome pack, which supports

integration into the city and helps them understand their rights and entitlements.

22. Where children in care are at risk of exploitation or going missing, effective plans are put in place to mitigate risk. Where risk continues, risk assessments are regularly updated and reviewed through the monthly vulnerable risk management process. This is helping to provide the right interventions to reduce risk for these vulnerable children.
23. Children's plans are appropriately focused on good health outcomes. Review health assessments are mostly completed in timescales. Initial health assessments and dental appointments are still subject to some delays due to the impact of the pandemic, but performance is improving. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires are used effectively to identify needs, and the therapeutic social work service provides tailored support to address underlying emotional issues linked to trauma. The majority of children in care have their physical and emotional health needs well met.
24. Children live with skilled foster carers who have been thoroughly assessed and well trained. Foster carers provide consistent nurturing care which supports children to make progress. Often, this has been supported through an extensive therapeutic offer delivered through the Mockingbird programme and a responsive 24-hour support line. There is a long-standing cohort of supervising social workers and social workers who have consistently supported carers and children over significant periods of time. This contributes to children's placements enduring over time.
25. Adoption is increasingly timely and early permanence placements are helping children to achieve permanence sooner. A trauma-informed approach, and innovative training, ensures that adopters are well prepared. Matching of children is supported through robust family finding and creative ways of supporting children through the transition from foster care into their adoptive placements. Adopters spoke of careful planning and transition of care-giving that has enabled them to build meaningful connections with their children. Most children and adopters have benefited from timely and attuned post-adoption therapeutic support. The local authority has made extensive use of the adoption support fund in accessing therapeutic support when it cannot be provided internally.
26. The headteacher of the virtual school has a clear and creative vision for the support provided to children in care. Personal education plans (PEPs) have improved since the last inspection. PEPs are well considered and helpful for children in care because social workers gather the information that is needed from school leaders and other relevant agencies. Important moments in the child's life are planned for, such as changing schools. Children in care settle into new schools and attend well. PEPs are then reviewed termly to ensure that the child is making the educational progress needed.

27. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer. Personal advisers (PAs) understand young people's histories, keep in touch frequently and are responsive to their individual needs. IROs continue to review plans for a period of time post-18. Support to care leavers is tailored through effective pathway planning and recognises their need for a range of practical and emotional support. Careful consideration is given to ensuring that care leavers can access local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs.
28. There are two vocal, inclusive and influential groups for children in care and care leavers. Young people in these groups have a strong sense of responsibility about what they do, with a clear agenda and workplan. Young people told inspectors that they feel valued, listened to and respected by senior leaders. They genuinely feel that their role makes a difference. Celebration awards are routinely organised, planned and enjoyed by young people.
29. PAs are ambitious and support young people to achieve their aspirations. There are a range of opportunities available to support young people, including apprenticeships and funding for further education. Three bespoke workers have been employed to support young people back into education, employment and training. An increasing number of young people are now in education, employment or training when they leave care. Many of them benefit from the effective partnership that the virtual school has forged with Leeds City College.
30. Care leavers can access a range of suitable accommodation. Young people are supported to develop their independence skills. Previous foster carers offer ongoing practical and emotional support. There are a very small number of young people in unsuitable accommodation. PAs and managers clearly understand the individual circumstances and risks for these young people and are actively supporting them to reduce this risk and gain appropriate accommodation.

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

31. Leeds City Council prides itself on promoting a child-friendly city, where it is a good place to be a child. The Leeds practice model of restorative practice is wholly and authentically embedded within the strategic leadership group as much as it is within the operational layers of the service. This brings a strong and supportive value base and culture that ensures a keen focus on children and families' partnership and empowerment. It is underpinned by a genuine belief and aspiration for children to remain within the care of their family whenever possible, balanced with the understanding of the significant responsibilities of safeguarding children when their needs escalate and cannot be met at home. As a result of this approach, children are making progress whatever their individual circumstances.
32. Corporate support for children's social work is overseen by committed and knowledgeable leaders. Political oversight through scrutiny is robust and

challenging. The executive member for children and the chief executive of the council have an excellent insight and understanding of children's social work, including an impressive operational knowledge. Despite the council having to make overall savings, the overall proportion of the total budget for children's social care has significantly increased to ensure that children remain the council's highest priority.

33. Corporate efficiency plans have affected some business support roles. This led to a reduction in trained child protection conference minute-takers, and, along with the increased sickness levels brought on by the pandemic, resulted in significant delays in holding initial child protection conferences. Many children waited too long for their needs and risks to be considered at the right level of service. Leaders have learned from this, and business support for this important and specialised role has now been restored and protected. As a result, timeliness has improved and children are no longer left waiting for consideration under the child protection conference process.
34. The governance arrangements for corporate parenting are well coordinated via a series of working groups aligned with key strategic priorities outlined in the corporate parenting strategy. Strategic accountability is driven by well-attended quarterly board meetings with lead professionals and elected member champions assigned to each strategic priority. Updates on progress are reported to the corporate parenting board on a rota basis, with additional scrutiny of the performance of residential children's homes.
35. Strategic partnerships are strong. Although there have been some professional challenges, these are resolved through the strength of relationships and the restorative culture. Strategic partnerships with health are well embedded and particularly strong in the early help services. Partnerships with schools have strengthened during the pandemic response and are embedded within the Leeds cluster arrangements. Schools spoken to were unanimously positive about partnerships with children's social care, both strategically and on an operational level between individual professionals. Partners embrace the model of restorative practice and genuinely hold the model in high regard. This leads to a strong, shared value base across the partnership and mutual agreements and understanding of children's needs.
36. An action plan was promptly put in place to address the areas for improvement identified at the last focused visit. This inspection has found that all of these areas have now improved through this planning. The local authority's self-assessment provides an accurate picture of key areas of improvement work and areas for development. In the self-assessment and during the inspection, leaders have been open about the key challenges that have driven a higher rate of referrals and increased numbers of children open to the service. Despite these challenges, the vast majority of children receive a high-quality service and have good relationships with their social workers, which is leading to improvements in their individual circumstances.

37. The director of children and families is an authentic and passionate facilitator for restorative practice. He and the senior leadership team are excellent role models. They are ambitious and influential, and remain approachable and supportive to workers, families and children. There is widespread, highly ambitious innovation and service development taking place, based on a sound understanding and knowledge of the needs of families and children, and frequently co-produced with them. There is a clear commitment to hear from a wide range of children and ensure that their voice is influencing key strategies. This ensures that services are shaped around the needs of the people who experience them.
38. Performance data is monitored regularly through a robust performance process, and managers across all levels of the organisation have access to data which is used at a team and wider service level to monitor performance. Since the focused visit, the quality assurance framework and audit process have been reviewed and refreshed. Audits are now completed by team managers independent from the child's social work team, leading to greater oversight and independent scrutiny of the quality of practice. Moderation panels have been built into the process to ensure consistency. There are numerous robust panels chaired by managers and quality processes across the service which ensure that the quality of practice remains of a high standard.
39. There are challenges in terms of workforce vacancy rates. Leaders have struggled to recruit skilled agency workers to fill vacant posts temporarily. Additional capacity has been created through social work assistants to provide practical support and additional visiting, proportionate to their role. There is also a substantial recruitment programme to encourage both new and experienced social workers to join Leeds.
40. There is a strong, continual learning culture. Workers are offered a range of training and development opportunities and professional progression is supported and encouraged. Central to all development is the restorative practice model which influences every aspect of social work practice. Workers are confident and skilled and this helps them bring about positive change with the families they work with. Social workers are very proud of their work and relationships with children and families. They genuinely want to make a difference for children.
41. Social workers benefit from high-quality supervision from experienced managers. Workers spoke highly about supervision and about their team managers. The management support they receive is highly valued and is helping workers to develop solutions to complex situations, and as a result, this helps children's circumstances to improve.
42. The majority of newly qualified social workers feel well supported. Their development and learning are supported through an incremental complexity of casework, which is co-worked with more senior social workers. This enables them to develop experience in a safe and supported way.

43. Social worker caseloads are high for some workers, including for some newly qualified workers. Leaders are fully aware of this and acknowledge that caseloads are not what they want them to be. The quality of core social work practice remains exceptionally high and thorough, despite workers' increased caseloads. Social workers are proud to work for Leeds, and there is a mutual respect and responsibility between leaders and social workers that creates a positive workplace culture and ethos. This has a direct and positive impact on the work with children and families.

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