

# Inspection of Derby local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 21 to 25 March 2022

**Lead inspector:** Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

An impressive and committed senior leadership team ensures that children living in Derby City receive a consistently good and often outstanding response from services. This ensures that children have the right help and support when they need it. Children's services benefit from strong corporate support that appropriately invests in and prioritises resources for vulnerable children. Senior leaders have established a clear and tangible service culture that places children at its centre. They lead by example and their dedication to continuous improvement results in achieving the best possible services for children.

An extensive quality assurance framework and comprehensive performance information help senior leaders to have a realistic and clear line of sight on the quality of frontline practice. A new model of social work practice has been embraced across the workforce and consistently used to support children effectively. This is a significant achievement considering the implementation took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns in 2020.

Since the previous inspection in March 2017, progress has been made on all the recommendations from that inspection and, in many areas, significant progress has been achieved. While continuous workforce challenges remain in Derby, senior leaders have taken creative action to help sustain social worker recruitment and retention to ensure that most social work caseloads remain manageable.

## What needs to improve?

- Access for all children to life-story work that helps them to understand their histories.
- Sufficiency of placement choice and location for children in care.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: outstanding

1. Children who need help and protection in Derby receive a consistently high-quality service. They receive a prompt and effective response when this is appropriate and when needs are identified. Skilled and knowledgeable workers know the children they work with well and develop comprehensive assessments and plans to meet their needs. There has been a significant improvement in the consistency of the quality of children's assessments and plans since the previous inspection. Across the service, strong, coordinated partnerships create a more holistic view of the child, which allows for the effective support and protection of children.
2. Children's contacts and referrals made to the Initial Response Team (IRT) are appropriate and responded to quickly. Children's family histories are consistently considered to help inform decisions. Previous intervention is captured in children's records and this information is used well to inform next steps. The use of a colour-coding system is a strength, as the level of risks to children can be quickly identified. All contacts and referrals to the IRT receive robust management oversight and direction and this helps to support the appropriate application of thresholds. Decisions for children are supported by use of the strengths-based model of practice, so that children receive a quick and proportionate response to their needs.
3. When workers in the IRT identify that children and families need support from Early Help, children receive an appropriate and timely service response. Early help services are comprehensive, including a bespoke early help offer of support for disabled children. Early help assessments are detailed and sensitive and they result in comprehensive plans for support that meet children's needs. Parental consent is well considered and appropriately sought. Children and families do not have to wait for the outcome of an assessment before receiving help from other services that they may need. The locality multi-agency vulnerable children's meeting provides management oversight that is effective in overseeing decisions about children when their needs increase or reduce. Experienced and dedicated workers understand the pathways that help to ensure that children receive appropriate support and help.
4. When there are concerns of domestic abuse, children and families receive a quick and proportionate response. Contacts are signposted for the domestic abuse multi-agency triage or immediate strategy meetings, dependent on the assessed level of risk to children. The multi-agency response to children

exposed to domestic abuse ensures that all available information is used appropriately to help inform decision-making to protect children.

5. Children at risk of significant harm receive a prompt response. Multi-agency strategy meetings are organised quickly and the appropriate partner agencies are represented, which ensures that there is effective information-sharing about children's needs and risks. Actions arising from the meetings are appropriately recorded and proportionate to the presenting concern. The use of the strengths-based approach helps to inform decisions and there is a clear rationale for the agreed outcome of the meeting. Children are quickly allocated to social workers and management direction is clearly recorded on children's records. Child-protection investigations are thorough and used effectively to inform children's assessments and plans.
6. Children who go missing from home and care receive a comprehensive and quick response. Workers and managers monitor the timeliness and quality of all return home interviews effectively. When children are found, they are consistently offered a timely return home interview. The return home interviews are of high quality. This is a significant improvement since the previous inspection. Interviews include push-and-pull factors and use of the children at risk of exploitation (CRE) risk tool. Multi-agency missing children meetings are well established and they use partnership intelligence effectively to map and disrupt CRE activity.
7. Social workers are passionate and knowledgeable about children's needs. They are skilful in identifying and considering all risks to children in families. Children's assessments are comprehensive. They explain the child's journey, capture children's views and wishes and use family history to help identify risks and children's needs. Assessments consider children's culture and identity, and the strengths-based practice model helps workers ask the difficult questions and hold conversations to help parents and children understand the concerns and why children's services are involved with them.
8. Visits to children are within a timescale and frequency that meet the child's needs and the location for visits is well considered and child-focused. Social workers are diligent in making attempts to engage children and families. Children's views are captured well, and social workers work hard to understand children's lived experiences. Direct work is undertaken regularly with children and a range of creative tools helps children to share their worries and talk about what makes them happy.
9. The vast majority of children-in-need and child-protection plans are detailed and clearly outline the risks and needs of children. Plans have appropriate actions, expected outcomes and timescales to help prevent drift. Children's plans are of a consistently good quality, and they are reviewed regularly in multi-agency meetings. Inter-agency working together is positive. Overall, information-sharing and communication between agencies are effective and child-focused.

10. Disabled children are offered a bespoke support and protection service responsive to their individual needs. Social workers visit children regularly and ensure that they see children alone. Social workers take time to build relationships with children so that they can reflect their wishes and feelings in planning. Social workers use a range of skills and tools that help their communication with children. Direct observation, close liaison and work with schools and other professionals who know children well help to inform children's assessments of need.
11. When risks to children escalate, appropriate action is taken to progress them through the Public Law Outline (PLO) process. Most children and families who are subject to the PLO process receive easy-to-understand letters and minutes that detail the concerns of the local authority and the actions that both the parents and the social workers need to take to reduce the risks to children. There is appropriate management oversight of the decisions to enter, exit and monitor children's progress within PLO.
12. For children aged 16 to 17 who are homeless in Derby, there have been improvements in the quality of responses since the previous inspection. When children present as homeless, there is a quick and comprehensive response to offer support to help the child return to their family when it is safe to do so. Children are appropriately subject to a single assessment of need, and the offer of support to families to help resolve conflict is comprehensive. While children are provided with written information about their rights and entitlements, this is not written in child-friendly language. It is not always clear in children's records when they are advised about their rights and entitlements. Senior leaders are aware of this and are launching a revised protocol imminently.
13. There has been progress in services for children living in private fostering arrangements. Children are appropriately considered to be children in need, and the oversight of an independent reviewing officer (IRO) allows for greater scrutiny of their plans. There has been some progress in responses to children living in private fostering arrangements since the previous inspection. However, leaders know there is more to do to raise awareness of the identification of arrangements, the quality of carer assessments and the recording of visits to children.
14. Leaders have a precise oversight of children missing education and those who are home-educated. Detailed tracking systems have been designed to ensure that information is shared and appropriate actions taken. Leaders have ensured that their track-and-trace systems are effective, drawing on information from a wide range of sources, including health and social security services, council tax checks and the police.
15. The number of electively home-educated children has increased significantly following the national restrictions due to the pandemic. Service capacity has not kept up with the increasing numbers of children educated at home. However, staff are alert to, prioritise and respond to safeguarding concerns for children.

16. Social workers receive supervision regularly and the strengths-based model of practice provides a comprehensive overview of progress for children's plans. Supervisions are focused on risks to children and there is significant management oversight of children's records at all stages of their journey.

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

17. When children need to be in care, they receive a prompt and thoughtful service response. Professionals collaborate effectively to assess risks and coordinate services quickly when children become looked after in unplanned or emergency situations. Children are supported by dedicated social workers who visit them often and see them alone. Multi-agency assessments and planning for their futures is effective and informed directly by children and their parents' views. When children are unable to return home, carefully planned permanent homes are sought for them.
18. Children in Derby who are identified as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) receive a diligent and sensitive response from workers in the specialist migration team. Workers demonstrate exceptional care and understanding of the impact of trauma children have experienced. Social workers make appropriate and persistent attempts to build trust with children so that they have the opportunity to share their experiences to help inform their needs, views and wishes. Children's health and accommodation needs are responded to quickly. Foster carers are sought who have a similar cultural identity, religion and language to help meet children's needs and when this is successful it helps provide children with stability.
19. Children's assessments are comprehensive. Assessments include children's views and reflect children's family histories, culture and identity. Planning for where children will live is carefully thought through to support their needs for family time and children are supported to remain with brothers and sisters when this is possible.
20. When children in care live at home with their parents, management oversight and supervision are of good quality. Creative work and support planning help to facilitate children moving back home safely. The quality of support plans for children subject to court orders is comprehensive. Plans appropriately include multi-agency support and daily visits from workers where necessary.
21. Children who need permanent care live with carers who meet their needs. Most children in care make good progress, are settled and well looked after. Children are supported to engage in education and have their health needs met and they receive appropriate support for their emotional health and well-being. Family time is promoted in a safe way that meets children's needs. Particular care and consideration are given to promote brothers and sisters' family time when they are unable to live together.

22. Social workers visit children regularly and this helps most children to build trusting relationships so that they can share their views and wishes. Some children told inspectors that they have had too many changes of social worker, and this meant they had to repeat their story. Children also reported finding it difficult when they are visited by duty social workers they do not know.
23. Children's needs and plans are regularly updated through the looked after children review process. Review meetings have good multi-agency attendance, are thorough and ensure that children's needs, views and wishes are reflected throughout the meeting. There is effective oversight of children's needs by their IROs and children are encouraged to attend their review meetings. Most children have plans that appropriately identify their needs. While they have clear actions, some plans do not always have timescales to help children, families and professionals keep track of progress.
24. Children have good access to participation opportunities, and they are actively encouraged to share their views in a range of different forums. Children are consistently offered advocacy support and/or an independent visitor and this is a substantial improvement since the previous inspection. There is an active and vibrant Children in Care Council (CiCC), which has been effective in ensuring that children's views are heard by the corporate parenting committee. Children told inspectors it was important to share their views and help other younger children who were also growing up in care. Children feel able to participate and said that they are listened to.
25. Children in care make good educational progress from their starting points. The virtual school works in close partnership with schools to ensure that children in care receive tailored provision and children are achieving well. Additional funds are used wisely to support children in care to help accelerate their progress. School leaders appreciate the creative solutions that are found to support children's educational attainment. Inspectors saw innovative and positive engagement with education, in art, computer programming and go-kart engineering. Projects such as these are helping to transform the lives of children in the care system. Personal education plans (PEPs) are detailed and of high quality and are reviewed regularly. Strong quality assurance processes are in place to ensure consistency in the work of designated teachers. Leaders have taken effective action to promote good attendance and keep the number of exclusions from school for children in care as low as possible. The virtual school helps to provide support for asylum seekers, with access to tablet technology and courses to begin to learn the English language.
26. When children need specialist mental health support, they are not always able to access services quickly enough. Although a new emotional health and well-being service has been commissioned to support children in care, it is too early to judge its impact.
27. Some children in care in Derby live with their extended families, who choose not to be assessed as foster carers. These arrangements are considered

appropriately to be in children's best interests. Management oversight of these children is strong and regular children's case-management meetings help keep a focus on the needs of children, their safety and the rationale for their plan. Children are visited regularly by their social workers and IROs have appropriate oversight of children. They visit children to capture their views about who they want to live with and where, and this informs children's plans. Permanence options are progressed, families are encouraged to seek special guardianship orders and assessments are completed for revocation of care orders.

28. Very few children live in unregistered settings. On the rare occasions unregistered homes are used, senior leaders are consulted and aware, and authorise the use of such placements. Leaders and managers satisfy themselves that safe care arrangements are in place and visit weekly to ensure that children's needs are met. In most cases, they have appropriately alerted Ofsted and have requested that providers register. The provision should be registered with the regulator.
29. There are not enough options for children's placements when they need care, and sufficiency is a continuous challenge. This means that some children live outside Derby, resulting in changes of school and more complex arrangements around family time. Once children are secure and living with carers who meet their needs, stability is good. Decisions about where children live are child-centred and children are well matched with foster parents or adopters who can meet their identity and cultural and religious needs.
30. There continues to be an overall shortfall in available foster carers for Derby children. However, the recruitment of foster carers is increasing year on year, following targeted recruitment campaigns. Foster carer assessments are of a good standard and the fostering panel is providing good scrutiny of the assessment and recommendation of carers.
31. When children are settled with their foster carers, workers are proactive in exploring whether an adoption permanence plan could better meet children's needs. There is strong, effective partnership working with the regional adoption agency (RAA) (Adoption East Midlands), which is responsible for the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. Senior managers have appropriate oversight of the work the RAA completes on their behalf. Children with a plan for adoption make good progress, are settled and are thriving.
32. Children have benefited from focused work to help speed up and achieve permanence. Permanence planning has improved through the exit-from-care team. This has enabled children to return home to parents when this is the right decision for them, or children remain with their foster carers under a formal order. This is helping children to feel safe and secure, knowing they are living in a permanent home where they will be cared for.
33. Children who live with carers under special guardianship orders receive good support. Appropriate support is provided to foster carers, extended family

members or friends through the creation of detailed support plans and regular social work visits. This consistent offer of help and support demonstrates Derby's commitment to support families and foster carers to provide permanence for children.

34. Some children benefit from good-quality life-story work that helps them to understand their journey in care. While IROs are consistent in promoting this as a priority area of need, not all children are receiving this work. Senior leaders continue to work on investing in and strengthening life-story work for children. This includes practice guidance for social workers, development of a tracker to monitor this work for children and the recruitment of a children's practitioner employed to support social workers to undertake life-story work.
35. Children leaving care benefit from the support and help of committed personal advisers (PAs), who make determined and persistent efforts to build and develop relationships with young people. Care leavers told inspectors that they value these relationships, and they described workers who have invested in getting to know them well and are responsive to their needs. They also reported that PAs are honest with them and tell it 'how it is', which is respected and appreciated. One young person said about her PA, 'I cannot fault her!' Another said, 'Thank you for all of the help and support – they do a great job!'
36. PAs know young people well and are passionate and dedicated in their efforts to support them. They invest in building strong relationships, which allows young people to feel valued and raises their self-esteem and confidence. PAs ensure that young people receive tailored advice and guidance to ensure their safety and physical and mental well-being, as well as supporting their future aspirations. This includes diligent intervention to keep young people purposefully engaged in education, employment and training.
37. Care leavers have comprehensive pathway plans that focus on addressing their assessed needs. Young people's complex needs, vulnerabilities and achievements are regularly updated, and their wishes and feelings are clearly recorded. However, not all pathway plans set specific timescales for completing the agreed actions.
38. Young people live in appropriate accommodation that helps them develop independence skills. Joint work with a housing tenancy worker supports young people for their first year of living independently. Young people are helped to retain important relationships and are helped to stay close with residential children's homes, foster carers and family to support them. PAs link in skilfully to either local or family resources to create a positive network of support for young people.
39. Young people are encouraged to be healthy and all care leavers are sent a copy of their health history before leaving care, which is a significant improvement from the previous inspection. When young people have intervention from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), transitions to adult mental



health services are smoother. However, it is more difficult for young people who have not been linked to CAMHS previously to access adult mental health services.

40. All young people leave care with bank accounts and the appropriate documentation that they need so they can establish themselves independently. Care leavers are able to receive appropriate support and help up to the age of 25 if they choose to accept this. If young people choose not to stay in touch after the age of 21, they receive a letter each year with a gentle encouraging reminder that they can still contact the leaving care service for advice and support if they need it.
41. Young people who came into the service as UASC are well supported by their PAs. There is a PA who takes a lead and is a champion for UASC. Young people are supported to build links with local churches and Derby refugee solidarity to give them wider networks within the community. They are placed in appropriate accommodation, have clear plans drawn up, are regularly visited, and are supported with their housing and employment needs.

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

42. Senior leaders are relentless in their commitment and dedication to improving services for children in Derby. The clear progress in all areas of recommendations since the previous inspection in 2017 demonstrates a leadership team that is child-focused, insightful and successful in improving services for children.
43. A strong leadership team and highly skilled director for children's services (DCS) have embedded a culture that places children at the centre of decision-making across the whole service. The development of a clear outcomes framework helps support and motivate staff to deliver good services for children. Leaders and managers across all levels of the service are knowledgeable and tenacious; their self-evaluation of service quality is accurate and they have a solid understanding of children's experiences.
44. Children's services benefit from strong corporate support, resulting in investment and prioritisation of resources for vulnerable children. This includes investment to support placement sufficiency and increased staffing to help with workforce capacity. There is persistent corporate oversight of the quality of service, including regular safeguarding assurance meetings between the DCS, chief executive officer, lead member for children's services and the independent chair of the Derby and Derbyshire Safeguarding Children Partnership.
45. The views of children in care and care leavers influence and help shape decisions made by the corporate parenting committee. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection. An impressive and creative CiCC told inspectors that they are very proud to be giving their views about what the

council should prioritise their spending on for children in care and care leavers. This was as a result of significant engagement and consultation with children about their top three budget priorities.

46. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, senior leaders have successfully implemented and embedded a new model of social work practice during this period. Staff have embraced this strengths-based model and use it consistently and effectively to support children. This has shaped and improved the quality of supervision and management oversight and provides clear evidence of the consideration and rationale for decision-making for children. There is consistent management oversight at every level of children's services, visible in children's records.
47. Senior leaders have created a learning culture and lead by example. Workers consistently report that senior leaders and managers are accessible, supportive and keen to hear their views about how services can be improved. Staff appreciate and enjoy the range of opportunities for continuous development and training. A range of lunchtime learning topics and events are highly valued by staff.
48. Strategic and operational partnerships in Derby are a consistent strength. Leaders have continued to build and develop positive relationships with key partners, and this helps social workers complete holistic assessments that enable them to work effectively with children and families. Areas for improvement from the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) in 2019 have been actively addressed. This inspection found considerable improvement in the relevant areas in the IRT considered by the JTAI.
49. To support their progress with improvement work, senior leaders use regular, thorough and reliable performance data and information. This forms part of a comprehensive quality assurance framework that consists of systematic closing-the-loop audit activity, feedback from children, families and workers and intensive quality assurance weeks. Senior leaders and managers have a clear line of sight of the quality of frontline practice for children. This is used to improve the quality of decision-making and service delivery.
50. Senior leaders are responsive to the changing needs for children in Derby. In a challenging environment, they have taken action to sustain social work recruitment and retention to ensure that most social workers have caseloads that have remained manageable. Social workers and staff have a consistently positive view of the support and oversight they receive from their managers. Supervision is regular and generally of a good standard, combining management direction with opportunities for reflection and individual support.

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