

Inspection of Durham local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 9 May to 20 May 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	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Durham County Council has improved and expanded services to children since its last inspection. There has been swift and purposeful responses to the areas for improvement in the last inspection and the areas for priority action identified at the last focused visit.

Leaders in Durham have an acute knowledge of the needs of children in Durham, and have provided an accurate self-assessment of their service. They have identified the highest areas of need and demand and have built effective and responsive services around them.

Well-designed and improved structures reflect the ambition to continually improve the response to all children and young people. Highly innovative specialist teams are providing very high quality support for the most vulnerable children. Core social work practice in the majority of service areas is effective, reducing children's needs and risks and improving their lived experiences.

Children in need of help and protection, and children in care, are benefiting from relationship-based practice that focuses on children's needs. The approach is to work in partnership with families to achieve change that can be maintained over time. This is leading to children and families making sustainable progress. The recently strengthened care leavers service and the 'hub' are beginning to improve experiences for care experienced young people.

What needs to improve?

- The response to children who go missing from home or care.
- Sufficiency of short-break placements, respite and sessional care for disabled children.
- Pathway assessments and planning for care leavers.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection benefit from a wide range of services delivered through well-established and well-coordinated early help hubs. There is a prompt response to meet the changing needs and risks of families through discussion at weekly early help meetings. A proactive culture of working in partnership with families leads to children and families receiving sensitive and proportionate early help support.
2. When partner agencies refer children to the First Contact team, their written contacts contain helpful and relevant information providing a detailed picture of the child and the presenting concerns. There is appropriate and timely management decision-making of contacts. This ensures that there is no delay and that children receive a proportionate response. Where further information is required, a multi-agency safeguarding hub assessment is appropriately triggered to gather further information from relevant partner agencies. This is ensuring considered and informed decision-making about next steps.
3. Inspectors found that in a small number of cases at the contact stage, informed consent from parents is not always sought. This means that sometimes enquiries are made and recorded without full discussion with families. Senior leaders took immediate action to resolve this during the inspection.
4. When immediate safeguarding concerns are identified, children are promptly transferred over to the Families First locality teams to ensure a timely allocation of a social worker and an effective and proportionate response. There is coordinated partnership working through good attendance and information-sharing at strategy meetings, leading to detailed action plans. Subsequent child protection enquiries are completed in a timely way. This is ensuring that risks to children are identified and appropriate support is offered promptly.
5. When children need safeguarding at evenings and weekends, most children receive a prompt and proportionate response. There is increased demand for services out of hours and this had led to the emergency duty team being very busy at times. For a very small number of children, the response is less well considered, leading to children being placed with emergency foster carers during weekends rather than a comprehensive exploration of other ways of managing risks to them and enabling them to safely remain in their family.

6. Children's assessments are detailed and analytical and consider the impact of parental behaviours on children's well-being. Strong pre-birth assessments and rigorous pre-birth planning ensure that children are safeguarded effectively when they are born. There are prompt assessments of children who present as homeless, leading to effective support and offers of appropriate accommodation.
7. Comprehensive assessments in the disabled children service lead to clear recommendations for services. There is evidence of creative direct work with non-verbal children and good evidence of sensitive partnership work with parents. However, too many disabled children wait too long for some assessed services to be put in place due to a lack of sufficient specialist providers, including short-breaks care, and this has been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This hinders them from making progress and places families under pressure.
8. The majority of children benefit from plans that are specific to their identified needs, and are time-bound and purposeful. There is effective use of family network meetings, which lead to robust and helpful family-led support plans. Contingency planning is not always explicit in written plans, although workers can describe what would happen if risks escalated or if children did not make progress. Expectations of parents are clearly detailed in realistic actions, and help is effectively provided through support from skilled social workers and other professionals. This leads to children's needs and risks reducing, and to their circumstances improving.
9. For children on child in need and child protection plans, social workers use strong relationship-based practice to build trusting and enduring relationships with children and their families. There is creative work to engage with children in order to ensure that their views influence the outcome of assessments and plans. Child protection conferences involve parents and extended family members. Child protection chairs welcome participation of children at child protection conferences. However, children are not routinely offered independent advocacy services, which could provide a stronger voice to those children who prefer not to attend meetings in person.
10. When risks to children escalate, there is an appropriate level of response to safeguard them. When required, children step up from child protection plans to be considered under the Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings stage. There is robust management oversight and grip of children in legal proceedings and pre-proceedings through senior management panels. Letters to parents and initial pre-proceedings meetings are actioned promptly and the subsequent plans are regularly reviewed. Assessments are undertaken to ensure that there is contingency planning and that timely and robust decisions about children's long-term arrangements can be made. This includes children remaining with their families when risks have been managed and reduced.

11. Children at risk of exploitation, including children in care, are appropriately identified, with the level of risk assessed through multi-agency meetings. Where children are assessed as high risk, they are allocated an exploitation worker, who undertakes targeted work to reduce risk. Due to a rise in demand, responses to children who go missing are not always consistently robust. Return home interviews are sometimes delayed and the process is not well coordinated. As a result, the circumstances of children going missing are unclear and the risks to them are not well understood.
12. The local authority designated officers are experienced and effective, with clear processes to respond to allegations against professionals. There is swift and robust decision-making to ensure that plans are in place to safeguard children.
13. There have been improvements in the arrangements for children who experience private fostering since the last inspection. Children are identified and visits are prompt to ensure that they are safeguarded. For a very small number of privately fostered children, their assessments lacked adequate detail and there was a lack of sufficient liaison with parents overseas. This means that not all of their needs are known and understood.
14. There has been an increase in the number of children being home educated, although the increase is less than that seen nationally. There are comprehensive systems in place to check that parents who elect to home educate are providing an appropriate education. Where this is not the case, there is a robust response and issuing of return-to-school orders. There is appropriate information on any potential safeguarding risks and vulnerabilities of pupils being home educated. This is ensuring that any potential risks are identified and well managed.

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

15. When children can no longer safely remain at home, they are brought into care at the appropriate time. They are well supported by committed social workers who visit children regularly and build trusting and understanding relationships with them. Assessments and plans for children in care are effective and informed directly by the children's and their parents' views. Early consideration is given to a range of permanent care options. These include children returning home to parents or to extended family members when it is appropriate. Children in care live in caring homes where they make progress and their circumstances improve.
16. Social workers fully understand the importance of promoting children's identity, including the relationships they have with their brothers and sisters and extended family. Family time is well considered and arranged to suit the child's needs. It is regularly reviewed and arrangements updated when children's

needs change. This ensures that they can continue safe and enduring relationships with people who are important to them.

17. Children return home to live with their parents when it is safely assessed as appropriate to do so. Social workers understand the risks and support needs within the family. Transition and support plans are thorough and lead to risks being well managed, and families are well supported. Due to this support, children are safeguarded and the risk of a repeat separation from their family is low.
18. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) know their children well and provide effective oversight of children's care plans. They visit children in their homes to gain their views. Parents, carers and children are encouraged to participate in their review meetings. This helps to ensure that children and their families are held at the centre of decision-making and planning.
19. Children have a good access to participation activities and there are opportunities for children to share their views and opinions in different forums. There is a very vibrant and enthusiastic Children in Care Council in Durham. They participate in corporate parenting meetings to engage in conversations about their experiences with leaders and local authority officers. Children speak highly about their social workers and feel listened to and well supported.
20. The majority of children in care are making good progress. They have sensitive life-story work to help them understand their identity and family history. Their physical health needs are identified through timely health assessments. They receive tailored and highly effective support with their emotional needs from the specialist therapeutic Full Circle team. They are encouraged to be involved in a wide range of hobbies and interests. This widens their horizons and begins to prepare them well for adulthood.
21. The virtual school is championing the educational needs of children in care. Personal education plans are used effectively in order to identify and support their educational needs. Children's aspirations are being recognised and supported. When required, additional support is given to ensure that children meet their full potential.
22. Most children who need permanent care live in stable and caring homes. There are a range of services that offer extra support to both children and their carers when they are under pressure. This supports the stability of children's placements and reduces the risk of them experiencing multiple moves.
23. For a small number of children with highly complex needs, there is a lack of choice and availability of local specialist homes. This means that a small number of children are placed outside of the county or in residential homes rather than with foster carers. A very small minority of children are in unregistered placements, with highly resourced specialist plans in place to

support them temporarily while registered placements are sought. Leaders are working hard to increase sufficiency and choice of places for children in care. This includes planning for additional in-house registered children's homes. There has been a successful recruitment campaign that has increased the number of foster care households. The recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers and adopters are rigorous. Foster carers and adopters are well supported by social workers and Full Circle in the transition and continuing care of children placed with them.

24. The fostering service has been strengthened. There are no longer any children placed with unapproved or unassessed connected carers. Assessments of connected carers are completed promptly, with a good quality assurance process and senior management oversight. When approved, connected carers are receiving tailored support to ensure that they can safely care for children and meet their needs.
25. The local authority has widened its pool of adopters through the regional adoption agency. When a child moves to their adoptive family, they receive ongoing support and advice. This is effective in assisting adopters to understand children's needs and the potential impact of their experiences. It helps with placement stability and reduces the risk of adoption breakdown.
26. Some children in care aged 16 and 17 live in unregulated placements such as supported accommodation. They are appropriately placed and well supported. Children are regularly visited by their social workers and have plans that address their needs. Their plan and placement are regularly reviewed by IROs in review meetings, where there is consideration given to the future accommodation needs of these children. This ensures that there is robust oversight of whether the placement continues to meet their needs and reduces drift and delay in identifying future accommodation provision.
27. The experiences of care leavers are improving through strong relationships with their young persons advisers (YPAs), who provide valuable emotional and practical help. Inspectors spoke with several care leavers who were exceptionally positive about their YPA and the support they have received. They described feeling cared for and for many their YPA has been a long-term consistent figure in their life. YPAs have a real desire to ensure that the young people are supported and their needs met. The transition point to the care leavers team is not always early enough for all care leavers. When it is too close to their 18th birthday, it leaves limited time for joint transition planning. The care leavers team managers are aware of this and there are plans in place to ensure better and earlier coordination of allocation to a YPA.
28. The quality of pathway assessments and plans is variable. Better plans are detailed and clearly identify the young person's needs for support to enable them to work towards independence. Not all pathway plans are up to date or specific enough in identifying young people's needs. They are not consistently

produced alongside young people, which limits their voice and ownership of the plan.

29. The majority of young people have key documents in place to aid their transition into adulthood. Not all care leavers are provided with a health passport at 18 years old, to ensure that they are fully aware of their health needs. Some care leavers with complex emotional and mental health needs have difficulty in easily accessing therapeutic support. They are not always supported to navigate GP appointments or access other adult services. This means a small number of care leavers are not making sufficient progress with their emotional well-being. Leaders acknowledge this and have plans to expand the dedicated therapeutic support for care leavers.
30. The education, employment and training needs of the majority of care leavers are identified. They are supported to attend university, school, college and training provisions that are equipping them for their futures and enabling them to fulfil their potential.
31. The vast majority of care leavers are living in appropriate accommodation of their choice. Support is available to them when they first move into their own property to provide help with paying bills, setting up utilities and making links within the community. The number of 'staying put' arrangements is increasing and wherever possible these are facilitated to allow young people to remain in stable foster homes beyond their 18th birthday.
32. Leaders have recently opened a care leavers hub as a space for young people to use for groups and activities as well as using services such as a kitchen and utilities. This is a positive achievement that is providing a secure base for young people. The young people who have been involved in the creation of the hub are extremely proud of its development. Given the size of the county, there is hope from the young people that hubs will be expanded across the county to give equal access and support to a larger number of care leavers.

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

33. Durham has a confident and stable senior leadership team, led by an experienced and capable director of children services (DCS), all of whom have high ambitions for children's services. Senior leaders have enabled and facilitated the embedding of the chosen practice model, which is underpinned by relational practice. There has been a relentless focus and deliberate drive to working longer and more intensively with families, in order to achieve real sustainable change, and to improve children's circumstances in the longer term, preventing multiple re-referrals back to the service. This has been driven by leaders and managers despite the additional demands brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

34. Leaders intelligently recognise and understand the needs of Durham children and build supportive services around them. Through robust self-assessment, they have identified the highest areas of need and demand. There has been significant ongoing investment to respond to needs through the development of a number of highly effective innovative specialist teams, such as the pre-birth team and the supporting solutions team. Leaders have also rolled out carefully planned service restructures, such as those in the children in care service, disabled children teams and the care leavers teams. These developments have been positive for the staff involved and have led to the significant enhancement of social work services for children and families.
35. An action plan was promptly put in place to address the area of priority action in relation to connected carers that was identified at the last focused visit. This is now an area of strength. There has also been significant progress in the vast majority of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. This is improving and sustaining services for children and families.
36. Political leaders apply scrutiny and are committed to the council's services to children. As a result of this, there has been capital investment and a healthy operational budget to ensure that children remain a high corporate priority. The leader of the council, the portfolio holder for children and the chief executive are highly attentive and keenly involved. They demonstrate a good understanding of the strengths and challenges of the service. This corporate support has ensured that the senior management team is continually focused on improving the lives of children and families in Durham.
37. Strategic partnerships are strong and there are positive cross-directorate relationships. Leaders have worked hard with local partners to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the model of practice and so partners can better understand the needs of vulnerable children. When challenges in partnerships arise, leaders quickly and actively address them. This is ensuring joined up delivery of services in the best interests of children. The strong practice model is leading to better social work practice, with robust analysis of risk and strengths, and is enabling managers and workers to track children's and families' progress more accurately. This leads to well-informed decision-making for children.
38. The corporate parenting strategy is ambitious and there is shared political commitment to and support for children in care. The members of the Children in Care Council regularly attend the corporate parenting meetings to address councillors directly. They also meet regularly with the chief executive and the DCS. There is a clear commitment to hear from a wide range of children and ensure that their voice is influencing key strategies. This helps to ensure that services are shaped by the children and families who experience and benefit from them.

39. The core offer for care leavers meets the needs of the majority of young people. The creation of the care leavers hub has been a tangible investment for them and they feel immensely valued and supported. There is an ambitious four-year strategy to improve the lives of care leavers in Durham. The strategic approach has led to much good work already, including increasing the numbers of care leavers who stay put with their foster carers post-18. This gives vulnerable young people ongoing family support and stability.
40. The quality assurance programme is comprehensive and gives leaders an accurate picture of the quality of services and the impact on children and families. There is a variety of quality assurance and performance data conversations that give a clear understanding of the quality of social work practice. Quality and performance meetings take place regularly through each level of the service to ensure that there is a shared knowledge and understanding between leaders, operational managers and social workers. Learning from numerous themed audits is embedded through workshops and meetings with workers, and children's and parents' feedback is used to good effect. This is resulting in continually improving service delivery.
41. The case file audit approach is a helpful learning experience for social workers. Audits are completed collaboratively with social workers, ensuring that the worker is able to demonstrate their best practice and reflect on where things could have been done differently. They provide a chance for immediate learning. The majority of audits include family feedback, which adds richness to the audit and ensures that the voice of the family is informing practice learning.
42. Leaders and managers at all levels continually strive for excellent social work practice and are not complacent. Durham's self-assessment provides an accurate picture of key areas of improvement work and areas for development. Throughout the inspection, inspectors found the same areas of strengths and areas for development that are reflected in the self-assessment. This demonstrates that leaders have a real knowledge and oversight of children's and families' needs and experiences, and they closely monitor the resulting outcomes.
43. Sufficiency of placements for children in care with highly complex needs remains an area of challenge and the demand for such services is increasing. Leaders have a focused sufficiency plan to expand capacity and continue to increase residential and short breaks placements and fostering households to meet demand. There are a very small number of children placed temporarily in unregistered accommodation when there is no other registered option for them. These children are highly supported and continually monitored by senior leaders, to ensure their arrangements are well resourced.
44. Senior management panels are providing regular and robust oversight of children who are entering care in need of legal oversight through PLO, including pre-proceedings. This is ensuring that there is robust oversight and that any

delays are purposeful and in the best interests of the child. Senior managers also regularly review the plans for individual children with the most complex needs and risks, such as those subject to deprivation of liberty orders. This supports shared decision-making around the most vulnerable children.

45. An impressive leadership academy has been developed to provide a high level of training and development for operational managers. There are numerous strands to the academy, including workshops, action learning sets and dedicated lead practitioners to provide mentoring and advice. The supervision framework has been refreshed, and there have been numerous masterclasses held. Better care planning for children and regular management oversight are both improved outcomes from the leadership training. There is recognition of the challenge in ensuring that the depth and richness of supervisory conversation is consistently recorded on children's files. The academy continues to develop this skill with new team managers.
46. Social workers have manageable caseloads. Newly qualified social workers receive high levels of support and development through the social work academy. This is an extremely well resourced service that is helping newly qualified workers develop their confidence at an appropriate pace.
47. Durham's workforce offer is substantial and it has ambitious aims to make the council an employer of choice in the area. There is a wide range of training and development available, as well as structured career development pathways. This encourages social workers to stay in the service and equips them well. Inspectors met a range of highly skilled and motivated social workers, who have aspirational aims for their own practice and are proud that this practice is achieving positive outcomes for children. They like working for Durham and there is a mutual respect between leaders and social workers that creates a positive and open workplace culture. This is having a direct positive impact on services for children and families.

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