

Inspection of Luton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 22 July 2022

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Leaders and staff have achieved tangible and significant progress since the last inspection in 2020, when the overall effectiveness of services was judged to be inadequate. In general, children and their families receive a much better service than they did, although the impact of improvement is not yet consistent for all children. A well-managed 'front door' ensures appropriate initial responses to children's needs. However, variability remains in the quality and impact of social work assessments and the longer-term support provided to children and their families. Leaders know this and have set in train plans to deliver greater consistency and improved workforce stability; however, some children continue to experience the impact of changes of social worker. Supervision of social workers is now taking place regularly, however, it is not consistently driving improvements in practice, to impact positively and with pace on the lives of children.

Improving the quality of support for children who need help, protection or care is a clear priority for elected councillors, senior leaders and partners. Leaders maintain close oversight, regularly engaging with children and staff in order to understand the quality of the service being provided and to assess the progress that is being made. They have taken steps to increase the total number of social workers, including creating a whole new team to support children in care. This has helped to reduce workloads and give staff time to work more effectively. Senior leaders know their service well and are implementing improvement plans that are making a difference to children's lives.

Despite the significant impact of COVID-19 and extremely challenging constraints in the funding available, leaders have managed to achieve tangible improvements in the support that is provided to children. Much has been achieved, but further action is needed to sustain progress and more consistently improve outcomes for children.

What needs to improve?

- The quality and impact of supervision and management oversight.
- The stability of the workforce.
- The quality and analysis of assessments of children.
- The quality of evidence-based assessments undertaken to support effective placement matching.
- The consistency of support and pathway plans for care leavers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Children in need of early help receive timely support from the dedicated Family Partnership Service that has been developed by leaders since the last inspection. Referrals are swiftly reviewed by managers, and families are allocated without delay to a worker with the appropriate skills and experience to address the presenting need. Children and families benefit from a range of interventions, including parenting programmes delivered directly by workers within the service or jointly with partner agencies in the community. Managers give workers clear instructions and plans of work that provide practical help to families.
2. A small number of children supported by early help services do not receive a rigorous assessment and analysis of their needs. This means that some work is less focused and effective.
3. The service responded impressively to the arrival of large numbers of children and families following the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Managers and workers moved quickly to set up support arrangements, and they worked closely with partners to meet the full range of needs of arriving refugees. Families provided positive feedback about the help they received.
4. Practice at the front door has been significantly strengthened since the last inspection. Regular and frequent management oversight of contacts to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) means there is a proportionate and timely response to concerns about children. Specialist triage officers quickly gather information, which is reviewed by experienced deputy team managers who make appropriate threshold decisions to ensure children receive an initial response proportionate to their level of need. Seeking consent from parents is prioritised, and this supports the timely gathering of information. Family history,

where available, is reviewed at an early stage to ensure that the new information is understood in the context of previous events.

5. Children's presenting circumstances are risk assessed to ensure that work to gain a fuller picture of their needs proceeds at the right pace. Social workers have the information and guidance they need to respond to concerns without delay, ensuring timely help for children. Strategy discussions are held swiftly when there are significant concerns for children's safety; most are well attended by relevant agencies. This helps ensure that swift investigations are undertaken to assess the risks children are facing.
6. When levels of concern for children do not meet the threshold for statutory intervention, families are signposted to advice and support, either within the community or from the council's Family Partnership Service.
7. An effective out-of-hours service applies child-focused decision-making to the contacts it receives. Out-of-hours workers communicate quickly and effectively, consulting their managers and taking urgent action when needed to protect children. When it is safe to do so, contacts are sent on to the MASH and triaged in the same way as daytime contacts.
8. While immediate risk is responded to effectively, assessments undertaken for some children are not sufficiently thorough or completed at the pace needed for the child. For these children, there is a lack of effective management oversight in the period following allocation. Assessments do not always include sufficient focus on children's histories to ensure an in-depth understanding of children's needs and vulnerabilities. Changes of social worker and managers also delay the progress of some assessments, so that they take too long. This makes it harder for staff to be assured that children are safe and well, and can delay the support that children need.
9. Practitioners have a good understanding of issues and risks within the communities they support, and they are able to identify vulnerable children. Risks to children who are exposed to domestic abuse are identified by knowledgeable MASH practitioners and swiftly considered by a skilled and experienced domestic abuse coordinator. Where a statutory service is not required, families are signposted to relevant support services, or referred to the Family Partnership Service. This work is thorough, and families and children are skilfully included in decisions that affect them.
10. Children who are reported as missing receive a well-coordinated and consistent response. Return home interviews are offered to children who go missing and most take up this offer. Children are routinely discussed at multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings, where plans are put in place to reduce risks. A MACE coordinator with a good understanding of risks, support services and thresholds ensures a continual focus on improving outcomes for these children.

11. Professionals take swift and effective action when there are concerns that children are at risk of honour-based violence, female genital mutilation or forced marriage. Strategy meetings are convened rapidly to share information, assess risk and agree the best way to safeguard children. There is good communication with specialist police officers and legal services, and effective use is made of legal orders to protect children. When necessary, older children are provided with accommodation to help keep them safe. Regular management oversight in these cases provides clear direction to social workers, who support vulnerable children well.
12. Luton is a priority 'Prevent' area and the council runs the pan-Bedfordshire Channel Panel. A knowledgeable extremism practitioner supports social workers in understanding and responding to risks. Strong relationships between children's social care and the police, including counter-terrorism officers, underpin a joined-up approach to the identification and response to young people at risk of radicalisation and extremism.
13. Effective action since the last inspection has significantly strengthened the response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless. They now have their needs swiftly and thoroughly assessed. A dedicated Family Partnership worker provides immediate advice and support, alongside a social work assessment. Where a return home or care in the child's extended network is possible, work to achieve this is undertaken with engagement from other agencies according to individual need. Support under S17 and accommodation under S20 is explained to children, who are well informed and given choice. Accommodation options are tailored to need. A multi-disciplinary panel oversees and reviews this work, to ensure that these children receive an appropriate response to their needs.
14. The local authority designated officer provides a child-focused, prompt and effective response when there are concerns about adults working with children in the borough. These are followed up on the same day and advice is provided to help keep children safe while investigations are underway. The service is proactive in identifying areas of concern and takes action to raise awareness of safeguarding responsibilities across the workforce.
15. Most children subject to child protection or child in need plans receive carefully considered and effective support from family safeguarding teams. There is a focus on supporting change and improvements in children's lives. However, some children's child protection and child in need plans are not strong enough. Stronger plans focus clearly on the things that matter most. This helps families and professionals to direct their efforts to improving children's lives.
16. Multi-agency reviews are held regularly to assess progress. This means that, in most cases, there is a shared understanding of children's progress and the changes needed to safeguard them and ensure their needs are met. For some children, however, when further incidents have taken place or their care

deteriorates, plans are not updated as swiftly as required to take account of the increased risk.

17. Most threshold decision-making is appropriate, and most children receive a service proportionate to need. However, for some children who are stepped down from a child protection plan, the follow-on child in need plan is not sufficiently robust to ensure that they continue to make progress. For these children, intervention is neither timely nor proportionate and it does not improve their situations.
18. Child protection chairs actively support progress for children. In some cases, they chair core group or other multi-agency meetings in order to provide continuity for families and to enable them to better understand how children's lives have progressed between formal child protection conferences. Children are encouraged to attend meetings about them when it is appropriate for them to do so. This brings the child's voice into the meeting. In these cases, minutes are sensitively written for the child to read.
19. Disabled children benefit from thorough assessment of their needs and from thoughtful planning. Specialist workers in Children with Disabilities (CWD) teams provide intensive support to children and their families. They visit children frequently, building trusting relationships with them and their families. They help parents gain a better understanding of their children's complex needs, including, for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder. They skilfully support parents to navigate the complex route to obtaining education health and care plans and other specific support that their children need.
20. Social workers in other teams also visit families regularly and develop plans which include the family's views. Direct work is captured in most children's records, although in many cases it is not clear that the work is sufficiently individualised to children's needs, or that it has a clear enough purpose to improve the child's situation. In a small number of children's cases, direct work has been done exceptionally well, including creative approaches that take account of children's communication difficulties.
21. In most cases, the use of Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings is effective and instrumental in diverting children from becoming the subject of court proceedings and from entering care. Senior managers ensure that children enter PLO when it is right for them to do so. Oversight of decision-making and good representation at a panel ensure that the right services are in place to support children.
22. Leaders have recently created a service to focus support for children at risk of extra-familial harm or on the edge of care. This is built on good multi-agency engagement, with professionals attending meetings to regularly share information.

23. There is regular contact with families who electively home educate their children, including communication in home languages. This has helped notable numbers of pupils to return to school. The local authority checks that suitable education is provided to those who are educated at home. Professionals take appropriate action when this is not the case. Clear processes are in place to oversee children who are missing from education. The local authority liaises regularly with schools to make sure children are safe and accounted for. Children whose attendance is causing concern are promptly identified and discussions take place with relevant professionals.
24. Very few children have been identified as being in private fostering arrangements. Thorough checks and assessments are undertaken for children in these arrangements. The low number identified indicates that awareness-raising work needs to continue to ensure that children are identified, assessed and safeguarded.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

25. Children become looked after when this is the right decision to secure their safety and well-being. Where possible, separation is avoided by placing mothers and babies together so that children can be kept safe while parents receive support and undergo assessments to inform longer-term planning. Children who have moved into new placements are not always supported by timely and detailed placement plans. This means the arrangements for their care are not as clear as they need to be.
26. A high number of children are enabled to achieve permanence through adoption or special guardianship orders in Luton. When there are challenges, nimble and flexible support is provided to overcome barriers to progress, including mitigating potential delays caused by the impact of COVID-19. There is an increased emphasis on achieving permanence for children in care, including greater exploration of reunification.
27. Permanence planning for children in long-term foster placements is not strong. More tracking has begun recently to ensure that permanence planning meetings take place regularly, to drive progress towards permanence. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are increasingly raising challenges when they see drift and delay.
28. Most children in care live in stable placements. Consideration of children's needs, including, where possible, brothers and sisters being placed together, leads to most children moving into culturally matched placements. There is limited evidence of comprehensive completed matching beyond this, and some children's social workers could not explain previous matching decisions and placements chosen for children they support. This means that children may not be able to understand life-changing decisions that have been made for them.

29. Every effort is made to keep children local to home whenever possible. However, many children live outside the borough because this is often where a home is available that meets their needs.
30. The fostering service is 'shouting loud and proud' in its campaign to raise the profile of fostering and encourage applicants. The level of enquiries and recent approvals of new foster carers are encouraging. The training and support offered to both foster carers and staff is strong; however, there remains a significant challenge in recruiting sufficient local foster carers. Luton has no children placed in unregistered children's homes.
31. The adoption service is strong. It works well to raise the profile of Luton within the regional adoption alliance (Adopt East RAA), a partnership of local authorities working together to promote good practice. There is effective practice-sharing and there are opportunities for development, including a focus on improving the quality of assessments. Adopters benefit from a comprehensive support offer. Service leaders have taken action after recognising that child permanence reports are not always sensitively written, knowing that children will read these in the future. Supporting closer work between adoption social workers and children's social workers has improved the quality of recent reports. Children who are being adopted benefit from well-planned transitions to help them and their families adjust to their lives together.
32. Most children's care plans reflect what they need and how this will be achieved. Regular reviews take place and actively involve children, parents and other relevant adults. IROs undertake midway reviews to monitor what is happening for children. Quality assurance checks before reviews help to ensure that children have access to independent visitors, advocates, language support, complaints processes and legal support, and that they understand their plans. Children understand their rights and the plans made for them, as well as boundaries and expectations where they live.
33. Workers visit children regularly and see them alone at home and in school. Records of visits do not consistently evidence their purpose or show that creative direct work is being undertaken, but children's voices, wishes and feelings are routinely recorded in their records. Social workers understand and are aware of risks that children may be exposed to, including bullying and discrimination. They provide good support to help children manage the impact of these experiences and develop ways to deal with the issues safely.
34. The council has risen to the challenge of providing accommodation and meeting the needs of significant numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Staff take swift and effective action to ensure that their health and education needs are met. IROs check that children have access to appropriate legal advice to help resolve their immigration status. Concerns about children who may have been trafficked result in referrals to the national referral mechanism.

Good use is made of the International Red Cross to help trace family members in children's countries of origin.

35. Workers ensure that strengths and difficulties questionnaires and annual health assessments are completed for children and recorded in their records. This helps ensure that children's needs are identified and appropriate support is given to them.
36. The virtual school is ambitious for children in care, proactively supporting them to do as well as they can at school. Workers and carers maintain a strong focus on supporting the well-being of children, knowing that this helps them to attend school regularly and to thrive. Few children in care are subject to fixed-term exclusions. The virtual school liaises effectively with schools and other professionals so that issues are quickly nipped in the bud. Workers make sure the right support is given at the right time. Leaders are taking action to continue to strengthen the quality of children's personal education plans. They know that steps to help children in care achieve their goals and aspirations are not always clearly defined.
37. Most children in care are now allocated a personal adviser (PA) when they are 15 or 16 years old. This good practice ensures that advisers can get to know children and provide support before they become 18, depending on their individual needs and whether children want additional support. Many care leavers benefit from a high degree of contact with their PAs, through regular visits and a high level of contact by phone, text and through digital platforms. A minority of care leavers have limited or no engagement and try to keep their PAs at a distance. Some PAs are persistent and creative, using various methods to contact and engage young people. However, this does not always happen.
38. The many care leavers who need high levels of emotional support benefit from good relationships with PAs who devote considerable time and effort to helping them. Some advisers have been in post for a long time and have developed excellent and hugely important relationships with care leavers.
39. The quality of support provided to care leavers is variable and is reflected in the range of pathway plans. Stronger plans are created with the young person and they outline steps to assist them to achieve their goals. Other plans are not as strong. They are written in the third person and do not use suitably engaging language. Weaker plans lack aspiration and do not identify the impact of young people's individual needs on their day-to-day lives.
40. Care leavers who are parents are supported by advisers who have a good understanding of the difficulties facing parents with care experience. Advisers' relationships with young parents are supportive and the parents make good progress, despite considerable challenges. Many parents successfully keep their children.

41. Apprenticeships with the council provide some care leavers with an invaluable opportunity to gain work experience. Leaders plan to broaden the range and location of these opportunities, to give care leavers a chance to work in a range of positions. Children in care and care leavers are provided with free gym access to promote their physical and mental well-being. This also includes scope to take a friend or family member, to encourage them take up this opportunity.
42. The virtual school is improving its support to care leavers. The early allocation of a virtual school PA is a positive means by which care leavers' educational and employment ambitions are supported. Some care leavers receive mentoring from staff in a range of settings. Most, but not all, care leavers benefit from effective support plans to help them secure future work.
43. Care leavers are supported to access relevant benefits and those in education receive grants and bursaries. Care leavers living out of borough do not routinely receive financial support for council tax payments, unlike those living in the borough who are exempt from council tax charges. This may impact on young people who live outside the local area, sometimes as part of a plan to promote their safety.

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

44. A coherent practice framework underpins the approach to providing effective support to children and families. An increasingly developed use of performance information has given managers and leaders a better understanding of activity and outputs. An effective, collaborative audit programme has also helped strengthen oversight of the impact and timeliness of support that children receive.
45. The community and workforce in Luton have been severely affected by COVID-19. Practitioners have demonstrated remarkable commitment to children throughout the pandemic, working in partnership with other agencies to maintain a service focused on safeguarding those in need and at risk.
46. Leaders have a very good understanding of the areas within the organisation where improvement is most required. The council's self-evaluation and developments already delivered within the service reflect leaders' sustained determination to improve the quality of support provided to children and young people. The integrity and commitment that leaders display are evident in their willingness to learn from a range of external support. Their actions have already led to improvements for many children. They know there is more to do to ensure a more consistent level of support for all children.
47. The decision to create a new Looked After Children team, and indeed to increase social worker posts across the service at a time of significant financial challenge for the council, demonstrate the corporate priority that is given to

children's services. Appointing a dedicated IRO for care leavers is a further example of resource allocation to drive up the quality of support to a priority group of vulnerable young people.

48. Leaders have developed strong operational and strategic partnerships in Luton, helping to make sure that the right services are provided to children in need. Multi-agency working within the MASH and with police, housing and voluntary sector services that support families is well embedded, demonstrating the extent to which partners are working together to deliver effective and timely initial support to children. The local safeguarding children board, operating within a pan-Bedford context, provides an effective forum for the development of services and multi-agency learning.
49. Leaders have developed a sustainable strategy to improve recruitment, retention and development of staff. 'Growing your own' is part of a long-term programme to address the considerable and significant challenges Luton has experienced in creating and keeping the workforce that children need. Leaders are under no illusion about the importance of a stable workforce, to enable children to build relationships over time with social workers from whom they can expect a consistently high quality of practice. Leaders have a road map that outlines how this will be achieved and they recognise that there is still some distance to travel. There has been some recent slippage in achieving targets for expanding the cohort of social workers undergoing their assessed and supported year in employment and for reducing the use of agency workers. Senior leaders, including the Chief Executive Officer, maintain close oversight of progress and are driving activity to increase the recruitment of staff.
50. An effective and focused model of collaborative auditing is increasingly embedded. This provides an opportunity to review support that has been given to children and their families and incorporates the views of children, parents, practitioners and managers. Concluding with a 'closing the loop' process that monitors the delivery of actions identified by auditors, these audits are effective in driving improvement in the support provided to individual children, as well as providing a clear line of sight for leaders.
51. Leaders track the timeliness, quality and impact of supervision. A range of work is in place to improve the quality and impact of supervision and management oversight for children. Despite this, there is still variability in the impact supervision has on children's lives. Children whose social workers receive clear direction and effective supervision, which ensures they understand their responsibility to deliver actions against time frames, make better progress and achieve better outcomes. Some children do not benefit from this quality of oversight and direction. For them, management oversight is not consistent in ensuring that they receive the right support and services at the right time. Changes of worker and manager also affect momentum and the pace of progress for some children.

52. Actions leaders have taken have reduced the very high caseloads seen at the last inspection and the subsequent monitoring visits. For example, in the CWD specialist intervention team, caseloads are kept low enough to allow workers to provide intensive support to children with complex needs. This reduces the risk of children's needs increasing to levels where they may need more intensive and expensive services.
53. Leaders have created a social work academy that is central to their programme to grow their own staff. The academy's focus is to provide the support and professional development opportunities needed to enable the workforce to deliver the best support they can for children. Social workers and advisers describe highly valued support and training. Regular practice weeks provide a dedicated period for the workforce to access new learning and development.
54. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the local judiciary describe improvements in leadership and management over the last two years. They know that the council's children's services have to respond to high levels of need across Luton's extremely diverse communities. They told inspectors that the authority has continued to take action through the courts to keep children safe when this is required.
55. The improvements that leaders have already delivered are reflected in the experiences of children and families. Parents and carers value highly the help they receive, when this is provided by consistent workers. Parents appreciate the range of practical and emotional support they are given to build their confidence. Children in care know about the plans that are in place for them. They are visited regularly by helpful social workers. They are less aware of the impact and benefits of contact with their IROs. Children know about the Children in Care Council, but they told inspectors they were not clear about the difference it makes. Leaders are aware of this and are re-energising the group.

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