

Inspection of Cumbria local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 20 to 30 September 2022

Lead inspector: Kathryn Grindrod, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be 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	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Children's services in Cumbria were last inspected in November 2017. At that time, services overall had improved from a very low base of inadequate to requires improvement to be good. Focused visits in 2019 and 2021 reported continued progress in some key areas, with more to do to ensure consistency in the quality and impact of work with some children.

Since then, the local authority has continued to strengthen the impact of relationships with key partners. Better application of thresholds between early help and children's social care means that children usually receive the right help at the right time. Disabled children in need of help and protection now benefit from effective support. The majority of children in care and care leavers live in good-quality, stable placements that meet their needs.

Despite these improvements, and taking into consideration the context of COVID-19 and local government reorganisation, the pace of service improvement in some areas has been too slow. Children are not receiving a consistently good response to meet their needs. Assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection are not always thorough and child-focused. There is not a sufficiently robust response to reducing risks for vulnerable groups of children, including those children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation, those children experiencing long-term neglect, and for children who are privately fostered.

There are firm plans to address the areas that need further improvement, including those identified at previous inspections and visits, but these are not systematically improving all children's experiences. When practice with children is not good enough, management oversight and challenge are not sufficiently robust.

What needs to improve?

- The response to children who go missing and children who are at risk of exploitation.
- The response to children experiencing neglect.
- The impact of leaders, managers and independent reviewing officers' oversight and challenge.
- The quality of assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection, including safety plans and contingency plans.
- The response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.
- The robustness of checks completed in relation to private fostering arrangements.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection in Cumbria do not receive a consistently good service. While the initial response to children by the multi-agency safeguarding hub is usually strong, subsequent assessments and planning are not always thorough and effective.
2. Many children in Cumbria benefit from a wide range of early help support. For some children, the need for early help is not identified soon enough and this leads to delay in them receiving help at the earliest stage. When children's needs or risks increase, thresholds for most children are correctly applied, leading to appropriate referrals to statutory children's services.
3. Concerns about children are responded to in a timely manner in the safeguarding hub. Information-gathering in the hub is effective for most children and leads to appropriate decision-making about next steps. The emergency duty team offers a timely and appropriate response in identifying and responding to risks to children.
4. Children in need of help or protection do not receive consistently good-quality assessments. Some assessments lack evaluation of the impact of parental issues on children. As a result, some children experience neglect for too long before effective action is taken.
5. When children are at risk of significant harm, strategy discussions are timely and involve the right professionals. Investigations are usually thorough and appropriate decisions are made to protect children. However, resulting safety plans are not always explicitly shared with parents, carers and relevant professionals, leaving a lack of clarity about how risks to children will be safely managed.

6. Most children are visited regularly by their social worker and this leads to an understanding of their views. However, this activity and knowledge is not always used to evaluate children's experiences and inform their plans. Some children experience changes of social worker, which makes it difficult for them to develop trusting relationships.
7. Planning for children in need of help and protection is not always effective. While some plans are child-focused in their stated aims, others lack detail in agreed actions or are too adult-focused. They also lack detailed contingency arrangements, should plans not succeed in reducing risks to children. This leads to some children experiencing ongoing neglect for too long before plans are revised.
8. Children at risk of exploitation or who go missing do not always receive an effective response. Planning for these children often focuses on processes and lacks critical evaluation of whether risks are reducing for them. As a result, some of these children experience ongoing risk for too long.
9. Young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are not routinely provided with clear guidance about their rights and the options available to them. While they are provided with emergency accommodation if necessary, they are not always helped to understand the longer-term implications of their decisions.
10. Most children in private fostering arrangements make positive progress. However, for most of this very small group of children, the local authority cannot be assured that the adults they live with are suitable, as required Disclosure and Barring Service checks are not routinely completed.
11. The management by the local authority designated officer of allegations regarding adults in positions of trust is robust and effective.
12. Most disabled children in need of help and protection are supported effectively. Their specific needs are identified in assessments, and plans and transitions are well managed. Work with disabled children has improved since the focused visit in August 2021.
13. There is rigorous oversight of children who are electively home educated or missing education. Action is taken to address concerns about these children and this is usually successful.
14. Children at risk of coming into care receive effective support from edge-of-care services. This leads to most children being able to remain with their families or current carers when it is appropriate for them to do so.
15. When children's situations do not improve, the local authority appropriately uses the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. This has reduced the level of drift for many, but not all, children. For some children, contingency planning is not effective, and they experience delay before appropriate action is taken to meet their needs.

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

16. Children who come into care in Cumbria need to be in care. Most children who are in care live in stable placements where they feel safe and make good progress. They are visited regularly by social workers and their wishes usually inform decision-making about them.
17. Decisions about permanence are made promptly when children come into care. Occasionally, there are delays in considering family members as alternative carers at an early stage. Opportunities for children to return home from care are progressed and supported when appropriate for them.
18. Care plans consider children's needs well and include their wishes and feelings, although for some children, planning is not individual enough and does not always include actions with clear timescales to address concerns. Family time is carefully considered in plans and reviews, ensuring that children see people who are important to them.
19. Children in Care Councils (CiCCs) across Cumbria meet regularly and host a range of activities. Children engage enthusiastically and value the opportunity to make their views known.
20. Children's physical and emotional health needs are met and social workers engage well with partners to ensure this. Children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are supported to make educational progress and work towards their targets. When children are missing from education, prompt action is taken to address this. Children in care enjoy a range of social and leisure activities.
21. Children living in unregulated settings do not always receive consistent and rigorous oversight. While most of these children are settled and making good progress, a small number experience instability. Unregistered children's homes are only used when all other avenues have been explored. These placements do not provide the stability that children need and are not appropriate places for children to live.
22. Foster carers talk positively about the support they receive. Their positivity and involvement in recruitment, along with a refreshed recruitment strategy, have boosted foster carer numbers and increased sufficiency of appropriate placements for children.
23. Adoption plans for children are progressed promptly. Introduction plans are detailed and support plans are thorough and consider longer-term support needs in addition to immediate needs.
24. Care leavers benefit from positive and trusting relationships with personal advisers (PAs) who understand their needs. Most care leavers are well supported to work towards independence and they can continue to receive support beyond the age of 21 should they wish to. Care leavers who do not wish to have ongoing support after they turn 21 are contacted annually and reminded about how to seek support should they need to.

25. Pathway plans are mostly detailed and provide a summary of young people's needs, leading to effective support. Most care leavers live in appropriate accommodation that meets their needs. 'Staying put' arrangements are promoted and supported when appropriate.
26. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly and supported by their PAs. PAs are actively involved in ensuring that care leavers' needs are met when they leave custody, ensuring that the multi-agency response is well coordinated to support the young person's changing circumstances.
27. Care leavers are aware of the local offer. The offer meets statutory requirements and includes payment for driving lessons and financial assistance for care leavers when they first set up home. Care leavers who live out of Cumbria, often because they were placed away from the area when in care, are disadvantaged, as their council tax is not always paid by the local authority.
28. Care leavers have their physical health needs met. Some care leavers struggle to meet their emotional health and well-being needs. The recent engagement of an emotional health and well-being service specifically for care leavers is not widely known about or used, meaning some care leavers continue to struggle in meeting their emotional needs.
29. Most care leavers are engaged in education, employment or training, and they make good progress. Those who are not in education, employment or training are not always proactively supported back into education or career pathways. In particular, there is a lack of ambition for care leavers who are mothers, who are not always supported to work towards their career aspirations.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

30. Since the previous inspection, some services for children in Cumbria have continued to improve, against a backdrop of local government reorganisation and COVID-19. Thresholds between early help and children's social care are applied more consistently, meaning in most cases that risks to children are recognised and responded to promptly. Work with disabled children is now effective and children's experiences improve as a result. The local authority's commitment to and investment in improving placement choice and availability means most children in care live in stable placements, where they make good progress.
31. Corporate commitment to continued service improvement has ensured that plans to develop services are adequately resourced. An accurate self-assessment of children's services and regular management reports ensure that the chief executive and lead member are informed about areas of concern. While leaders offer challenge, this has not hastened the pace of change in some areas identified for development.
32. The leadership team in Cumbria welcomes external scrutiny and input to inform their service development plans. As a result of comprehensive internal quality assurance and external scrutiny, leaders and managers have developed an

accurate self-assessment and are aware of areas where practice needs to develop.

33. Action is taken to improve strategic responses to areas identified as needing improvement. However, this has been too slow to translate into practice improvements with some vulnerable groups of children. Work with children at risk of exploitation was identified as an area needing improvement at the inspection in 2017, and there remains a need to improve the response to children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless.
34. Leaders in the local authority work well with strategic partners and offer appropriate challenge when services are not effective. This usually leads to improved outcomes for children. Mature and well-embedded partnership arrangements in the safeguarding hub are supporting timely identification and response to risks and needs. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary report effective relationships with managers in Cumbria, which are lessening the need for external experts in care proceedings and reducing unnecessary delays for children.
35. The corporate parenting board welcomes feedback from children and care leavers on a regular basis and takes action as a result of this feedback. 'Promise Ambassadors', children and young people who are members of the CiCCs, are supported to seek feedback from other children and care leavers to help inform service delivery.
36. The local authority's performance management processes and systems, including a regular programme of single and multi-agency auditing, have led to a largely accurate assessment of performance. Social workers are routinely involved in collaborative audit discussions and an increasing number of families also contribute to this activity. While audits provide a useful opportunity to reflect on practice, when team managers audit their own work, they are not sufficiently self-critical about the quality and impact of their own supervision of social workers. This is mitigated by moderation, which is accurate and child-focused.
37. Actions are not always identified in audits, and when they are, they are usually compliance-focused. Managers do not always follow through in ensuring that actions are completed. As a result, while the auditing programme provides a useful picture of overall practice, it does not always lead to improvements for individual children whose cases are audited.
38. There is routine management oversight across children's social care. This includes oversight by senior managers when appropriate to the level of concern or risk. When practice is not strong enough to have the required impact for children, managers do not always recognise this and challenge effectively. Management oversight does not always ensure that robust and realistic contingency plans are in place, meaning decisions and actions are reactive for some children.
39. Supervision of social workers happens regularly and mostly focuses on children's experiences, although compliance issues do dominate agreed actions.

Social workers report that supervision supports them to reflect on their practice. Workers feel well supported by their managers, through both formal and informal supervision. Group supervision is used to develop ideas and techniques for use in work with children and families.

40. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have oversight of most children in between conference and review meetings. Some IROs are rigorous in challenging decisions for children when they do not believe them to be appropriate, for example seeking their own legal advice about plans. However, for some children, IRO focus can be on processes rather than children's experiences and this means that sometimes plans do not progress as quickly as they need to.
41. Training and development opportunities for social workers in Cumbria are well developed and valued by staff. Social workers usually receive a thorough induction when they start work with the local authority, and agency and permanent workers have equal access to training opportunities. The local authority's chosen model of practice is embedded and well understood by partners as a result of training offered. This enables professionals to provide clarity to children and families about their concerns and what needs to change.
42. Social worker recruitment and retention are priorities for the local authority, having been an issue, as in other parts of the country. Leaders have created and developed several initiatives to address these issues, which are starting to have a positive impact on workforce stability in some areas. In support and protection teams, the difficulty in recruiting social workers has more of an impact, and some children experience changes in social worker. This sometimes leads to fragmented relationships and, for a small number of children, delays in escalating responses to long-standing concerns. Career development pathways help to retain staff looking to progress in their career.
43. Workloads are manageable for social workers and PAs. Children's social care workers enjoy working in Cumbria. Senior managers are described as being visible, accessible and supportive. Social workers are positive about the communication and support that they receive from managers at all levels of the local authority.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This report is available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2022