

# Inspection of Dudley local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 31 October to 11 November 2022

**Lead inspector:** John Roughton, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

There has been an overall decline in the quality of services for children in Dudley since the last inspection in 2018. Children in Dudley are not receiving consistently effective services to improve their lives. Senior leaders and elected members understand the main challenges they face to improve the experiences of their most vulnerable children, particularly in securing a stable and strong workforce. However, the response to these challenges is too slow. Political leaders do not give sufficient priority to the needs of vulnerable children, as frontline workforce capacity continues to be a huge factor preventing improvement.

There has been some progress in addressing areas which were identified for improvement in 2018 and the areas for priority action given at the focused assurance visit in October 2020. However, the lack of stable leadership during most of the past four years has contributed to delays in achieving an effective response. Since the appointment of a permanent director of children's services in early 2021, there has been greater focus on the areas for improvement, particularly in relation to the timeliness and quality of decision-making and strategy meetings in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the response to children who experience extra-familial abuse or who go missing and securing permanence for children in care. Too much variability remains in the quality of assessments and plans, the timeliness of entering pre-proceedings for children at risk of harm and the oversight of unregulated and unregistered provision.

## **What needs to improve?**

- The quality, consistency and timeliness of all assessments, plans, supervision and the recording of management decisions and their rationale.
- The early consideration of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) for children at risk of harm.
- Management oversight of children in unregulated settings.
- The promotion of advocacy and participation opportunities for children in care and care leavers.
- Frontline workforce sufficiency.

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

1. Children's needs are promptly identified within the MASH. The co-location of police, health, education, housing and domestic abuse advisers enables timely information-sharing and checks. Managers and senior social workers have oversight at key decision points. Decisions are well recorded, with clear rationale for the decisions made. Parental consent is appropriately considered and overridden where it is in the child's best interests. Thresholds are appropriately considered and applied to ensure children receive a proportionate response to their needs. Records are written to the child by social workers and managers, meaning that there is a clear focus on children's needs and the impact of their experiences.
2. The early help service works effectively with partners. Families access a range of services, including intensive family support. Increasingly, partner agencies take a lead in assessing and supporting children and families early enough to respond to needs before they escalate.
3. In the MASH, effective systems are in place to consider and respond to domestic abuse, children missing from home or care and children at risk of exploitation.
4. Children's needs are addressed appropriately and swiftly out of office hours to ensure that they are safeguarded.
5. Strategy meetings are mostly held promptly, with partners working well together to provide information to assess immediate risk. When a joint s47 investigation is necessary, in a minority of cases police colleagues are not always readily available, and the important joint perspectives are lost in the decision-making process.
6. The child exploitation team is a considerable strength, providing a skilled and effective service to children who are at risk of exploitation and their families. The response to children who go missing from home or care is strong.

Workers proactively engage with children, doing more than just a return home interview to reduce the risk of future episodes of children going missing from home or care.

7. The quality of assessments undertaken by social workers is inconsistent. Some are overly descriptive and repetitive and do not focus sufficiently in their analysis on the key needs of each child. Some assessments do not explore the wider context of families' lives or demonstrate professional curiosity to ensure that all needs are identified and responded to.
8. Children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless receive a variable quality of service. While immediate arrangements are made to ensure children have temporary accommodation, a full assessment is not always completed to ensure their needs are met and risks managed. Leaders recognise that the current policy and practice are not robust, and these are currently under review.
9. Children in need do not always benefit from holistic plans which help to meet their needs. Too many plans do not address the needs of the child well enough, and actions are not child-focused or timebound. Children value their relationship with their social worker, but some have experienced many changes of worker, which makes it harder to build a trusting relationship. Visits to children are not always purposeful or timely, or in line with their needs and risks.
10. Children who meet the threshold for child protection are not always escalated soon enough, remaining on child in need plans which do not address risks effectively. Staff changes have an impact on the quality and timeliness of information presented to conferences. Child protection conference plans lack clarity about what needs to change for children. Some plans for interventions are overly focused on the adults and their attendance. Conference minutes are lengthy and not easy to follow. This means it can be difficult to understand the key issues of concern, particularly in situations of neglect in families with several children. Most core group meetings are held regularly and provide a helpful multi-agency update on progress.
11. When referred, children and families benefit from the work of the family group conference service in enabling children to remain safely at home and be supported by the family network.
12. Many children are left in situations where no improvement is made and referred into pre-proceedings too late. Once referred, well-considered evaluation of children's needs leads to clear plans and timescales for achievement. Plans are reviewed regularly, formally through legal gateway meetings and, on a more regular basis, by the court progression manager.
13. Privately fostered children in Dudley are identified by well-informed professionals. This results in prompt checks and assessments of carers. Some

children remain in private fostering arrangements for a long time without review as to whether this is still the most appropriate placement.

14. The designated officer service in Dudley responds promptly and robustly to concerns about adults in a position of trust who present risks to children.
15. The highly effective virtual school has a clear oversight of children missing education in Dudley. Tracking systems ensure that sharing of information is timely and actions taken are appropriate. Leaders do not shy away from using statutory attendance orders to ensure that pupils attend school or receive their education in appropriately registered places. Leaders also have a secure oversight of all home-educated children. Where there are concerns, the team challenges appropriately and involves other agencies when required.
16. High caseloads and lack of capacity in the children with disabilities team mean that disabled children are not receiving a consistent service or having their needs assessed promptly enough. As a result of staff shortages, managers undertake social work tasks, which reduces their time for management supervision and oversight. Leaders had taken steps to address this issue prior to the inspection, with more staff joining the service as the inspection concluded.

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

17. Children come into care as a result of correct decision-making. However, this is not always timely, and for some, this intervention should have happened sooner. Many children do not benefit from effective care planning with consideration of early permanence. This includes unborn babies, where viability assessments of extended family are not always considered until after the child is in care.
18. Since the focused assurance visit in 2020, there have been formal arrangements in place to consider and progress permanence. For many children, this is happening later than it should, largely due to changes of social worker and capacity issues, particularly in the court team and the fostering service. Although early permanence is considered and tracked for young children, it is not routinely considered promptly for school-age children.
19. When children come into care, families and friends are proactively considered as potential carers. Viability assessments are undertaken, but for some children, there are delays in completing full connected carer assessments. Children live with their brothers and sisters wherever possible, following detailed 'together or apart' assessments. This promotes their sense of identity and connection with their family members.
20. Court social workers have high caseloads. As a result of staff shortages, they retain cases when proceedings have been concluded. This means they are

unable to complete work such as assessments, or to review documentation and carry out direct work with children and families in a timely way. In proceedings, independent assessments are not always thorough or timely. This leads to commissioning of further assessments, contributing to further delay in completing proceedings and finalising permanence for children.

21. Children who have adoption as their plan receive a positive service. Child permanence reports are detailed in setting out the child's history and reasons for their adoption. Children live with well-matched adopters where they do well. Some sensitive work with children who are going to be adopted is undertaken to help prepare them for goodbye visits to parents and to provide an age-appropriate explanation of adoption.
22. There are very few foster to adopt placements. This is due to all the different aspects of planning being insufficiently aligned at the earliest stage, including assessments not taking place soon enough. Senior leaders recognise that this is an area of practice that requires further development.
23. Children in care in Dudley are supported by committed social workers. Most children are seen regularly and most benefit from timely and well-planned visits from social workers they have positive relationships with. As a result, children are able to discuss what is difficult and what is important to them. Some social workers complete thoughtful direct work with children, which takes into account their abilities and communication styles. This helps children's views influence their plans. However, direct work and life-story work are variable in quality and are impacted by turnover of staff and high caseloads.
24. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well cared for. Their care, identity and religious needs are understood and supported sensitively by their social workers.
25. Most care plans are well written, with children's needs and actions to progress permanence clearly articulated. Most reviews are held regularly, but the quality is variable. Stronger reviews involve children and families and are written to the child, with a clear focus on their experiences. Independent reviewing officers keep in touch with children between reviews and encourage children to contribute to their plans.
26. There is limited promotion and availability of advocacy to support children. Recently commissioned arrangements offer a very small number of children a service. The current offer is under-resourced to meet the needs of the number of children in care. There are delays when children request access to their records, and this causes distress to those wishing to understand their histories. When information is provided, it is not always done so in a sensitive way.
27. Children in care who are at risk of exploitation are well supported. Social workers persistently engage with these children and take protective action

when necessary. Well-considered actions and support are provided to reduce risks when children go missing from care.

28. Health assessments and routine appointments are up to date for most children in care. However, the timeliness of initial health assessments requires improvement. Delays for some children in accessing more complex health services mean that children's needs are not always fully understood or met in a timely way.
29. The virtual school is ambitious for all children in the care of Dudley children's services. Leaders and staff know individual children very well and adopt a personalised approach to meeting the needs of children in care. Most children achieve well relative to their starting points. The impact of the pandemic has affected some outcomes, such as speech and language in the early years. The virtual school has been proactive in exploring the use of speech and language screening toolkits in schools to support children. There is a close partnership with schools to ensure that vulnerable pupils receive the right provision. School leaders appreciate the support and guidance they receive to support children's engagement with education and their educational attainment. The virtual school is keen to promote enrichment programmes aimed at raising aspiration and celebrating children's involvement. This is an area of strength in Dudley.
30. The recruitment of foster carers is not targeted enough to respond to the needs of children in Dudley. As a result, there is an insufficient number of foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children in care. Carers have access to a training programme. However, they are not supported to complete mandatory training soon enough. Not all carers have an allocated supervising social worker, meaning carers' supervision and unannounced visits are not being carried out, due to short-term staffing issues. Despite this, many children are in placements which meet their needs well, and they are cared for by nurturing carers. Children enjoy a range of activities and hobbies suited to their individual needs.
31. Not all children live in suitable homes. There is a lack of management oversight of the use of unregulated provision for children. Some children placed in unregulated provision (supported accommodation) have needs which increase over time and for which they require care and accommodation. This means that children should be moved to a registered home which will meet their needs, or the local authority should encourage the setting to register. The lack of understanding and enquiry about the use of unregulated placements mean that the local authority cannot be assured that children are safe. As this inspection concluded, new arrangements were being implemented to strengthen the management oversight of these children and encourage registration where appropriate.
32. Most children leave care appropriately. Some children benefit from stability through special guardianship orders, where this is in their best interests. The 'no detriment' policy is applied effectively in order to support carers in their

court applications. Appropriate financial, practical and emotional support is available for children and carers to access post-order. These legal orders are not always secured swiftly for children. The decision-making for placement with parents is not consistent or robust. While some children have placement with parents' assessments which are approved by a senior manager, others do not, or the assessment is not based on clear enough risk analysis and evaluation.

33. The regional adoption agency (RAA), Adoption@Heart, undertakes the recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. The local authority works closely with the RAA, allowing for appropriate oversight of the service it receives. The adoption panel provides effective quality assurance to the local authority.
34. Many care leavers are not allocated a young person's adviser (YPA) soon enough to support a seamless transition into adulthood. Some care leavers benefit from long-standing, positive and trusting relationships with their YPAs, who visit regularly. YPAs hold purposeful and focused conversations to keep up to date with changes in care leavers' lives and ensure that timely support is offered in line with their needs.
35. The involvement of care leavers in the development of pathway plans is variable. Their views are not always evident or accurately recorded. This is not helpful for care leavers in ensuring that aspirational plans are developed for them. There is limited evidence of management oversight of pathway plans. Health needs are addressed in pathway plans, but they do not always contain enough detail about the health practitioners involved or how to contact them. Care leavers do not consistently receive health passports, meaning that they do not have access to important health information about themselves.
36. Participation arrangements for care leavers are underdeveloped. While those who have become Dudley council apprentices have benefited from their opportunities and experiences, most young people who have left care have little input into service development. The current drop-in arrangements for care leavers do not promote their engagement, as drop-in sessions only take place one afternoon a week and the venue is not easily accessible. More needs to be done to ensure that care leavers living away from the Dudley area can be involved and consulted, so that the widest range of experiences can help to inform and improve outcomes for all young people leaving care.
37. Care leavers have access to a wide range of supported and independent accommodation options and can access tenancy workshops to help them understand what their rights and responsibilities will be. Some young people enjoy stability through 'staying put' arrangements.
38. Support for care leavers to attend education, training or employment is variable. There are links with other agencies who support young people, such as Connexions, job centres and those who provide welfare rights advice to ensure young people access appropriate benefits. There is no dedicated

resource to help those over 18 years who are not in education, employment or training. YPAs offer tailored advice and guidance, but there is very limited capacity. As a result of this, not all care leavers receive the support that they need to improve their life chances.

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

39. Senior leaders are under no illusions about the services and practices which require improvement. The chief executive, lead member and the children's services leadership team are aware of the challenges faced in ensuring Dudley's most vulnerable children are kept safe and enabled to thrive. Leaders' self-evaluation is largely accurate. However, some areas of practice have not been given sufficient attention, such as the oversight of children in unregulated settings. Monitoring systems are underdeveloped in some areas of the service, failing to provide leaders with an accurate understanding of performance.
40. The appointment of an experienced and permanent director of children's services in January 2021 has brought much-needed stability and focus after a lengthy period of interim arrangements. This had led to a delay in responding to the challenges faced by children and families in Dudley. The director has developed stronger strategic arrangements with partner agencies, evident in the revised early help strategy earlier this year, with more families receiving effective help at the right time.
41. The director has engaged constructively with peer local authorities to learn from them and address the concerns around the 'front door', pre-proceedings and permanence deficits identified in the focused assurance visit in 2020. Stronger arrangements are now in place to track progress of children in the PLO. However, these arrangements still do not ensure that early consideration is given to the application of the PLO where children's home circumstances do not improve. Relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the family court are constructive. However, the work which comes into the court arena is not routinely timely or consistently strong.
42. The commitment to corporate parenting is evident across elected members and the council. The recruitment of six care-experienced apprentices is a positive development. Their involvement with corporate parents is helping to bring the voices of children in care into the service and is informing strategic planning. Participation opportunities for children in care and care leavers are limited. Too many are unaware of the work of the corporate parenting board and the opportunities to take part in activities, consultation or award ceremonies. However, those who do attend value these experiences. 'The Source' youth centre is a valuable service where participation activities take place, but its location and limited opening hours make it difficult to access for care leavers, further undermining engagement. More needs to be done to enable



children in care and young people to be both aware of what is available and to be involved in shaping it.

43. Advocacy arrangements for children are not well promoted. There are not enough advocates to work with children to ensure they have an independent voice. Where advocacy is provided, it is time limited and there is no guarantee of consistency of advocate.
44. Children with more complex needs do not always live in suitable regulated provision. There has been a lack of senior management oversight and understanding of these children's circumstances. This means that senior managers are not assured that these children's needs have been assessed and are met. Senior managers are also unaware if the care provided requires a home to register. This inspection resulted in immediate action being taken to rectify this.
45. Performance management is underdeveloped and does not help leaders to identify strengths or weaknesses in practice. There is inconsistency in the case recording system in ensuring performance data is reliable. Some managers do not have a clear understanding of the value of performance management and some systems offer only a basic set of data. This hinders the ability of leaders to establish consistency of social work practice when children's cases are transferred to other workers, and in supervision and management oversight.
46. Quality assurance arrangements, including the analysis of complaints, are not used effectively in order to ensure improvement in individual children's circumstances and the identification of thematic issues. Audits do not consistently result in a review of practice or staff training and development in order to improve outcomes for children. Leaders are aware of the need to strengthen these arrangements.
47. The quality of management oversight of frontline practice varies. Most supervision is regular, but there are pockets of the service where there have been significant gaps of several months. Supervision does not always focus on the impact or experiences of children. A focus on process makes it hard to measure whether progress is made. Workers speak positively of management oversight and supervision. However, case records are variable in quality.
48. There is a comprehensive workforce development plan in place, with a strong emphasis on 'growing your own' social workers. However, the fragility of the current workforce found during this inspection presents a risk to these plans coming to fruition. In some areas of the service, workers are responsible for very high caseloads, impacting on their own well-being and the quality of work they carry out. Consequently, there remains too much variability for children in Dudley and too many children do not receive a timely and high-quality service which responds to their risks and needs.

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](mailto: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](http://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](mailto: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](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2022