

Inspection of Lancashire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 November to 9 December 2022

Lead inspector: Sarah Canto, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children living in Lancashire who need help, protection and care are supported well by this local authority. They are supported to have positive relationships with staff and are helped to reach their potential. Since the previous inspection, senior leaders have continued on a consistent journey of sustained improvement, led by a long-standing director of children's social care who has now left. Before leaving, they carried out a detailed handover with the new director so that developments could continue at pace. The improvements made have resulted in many of the recommendations from the previous inspection being comprehensively addressed. Politicians and senior leaders are child-focused and work closely with partners on clear strategic priorities for children. The additional financial investment and focus on children is evident; the service areas targeted for improvement have been transformed for children and families. Early help services have been successfully restructured with partner agencies, resulting in an impressive range of support for families. The implementation of the local authority's chosen practice model has been effective and led to some positive changes for children and families. Most children in care and care leavers live in stable homes that meet their needs, to help them progress and achieve. Relationship-based practice is embedded across all services and is at the heart of achieving positive outcomes for children.

The local authority is focused on further improvement in its aspiration to achieve consistently high standards across the organisation for children. Politicians and partners have full confidence in the recently appointed senior leadership team, as

well as the previous well-established leadership team, who are committed to building on the progress made.

What needs to improve?

- The tracking, progression and timescales for some children within the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) and the quality of pre-proceedings letters.
- The quality and impact of return home interviews.
- The provision of information to care leavers about their health histories.
- The provision of information about entitlements in a format that allows children aged 16 and 17 who may be homeless, to take away and give full and informed consideration to their options, and the quality of child in need plans for those children who may be homeless and do not need to become looked after.

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

1. Children and families benefit from a wide range of purposeful early help services. They have the right support early on and the need for statutory support is avoided where appropriate. Early help assessments are detailed, highlighting strengths and what needs to change. Interventions are timely and proportionate, and delivered alongside well-established partnership arrangements. Early help services, which include the Child and Family Wellbeing Service and linked education officer, and the 'front door', are well connected, so that if families need a different response this is achieved swiftly and in children's best interests. Children's lives have improved as a result of this effective support.
2. When referrals are made for children who may need help and protection, professionals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) respond in a timely way, both in and out of normal working hours. Risks to children are carefully considered, and appropriate decisions are made. Management oversight is clear at each decision-making point. Partnership working and information-sharing in the MASH are established and work well.
3. The obtaining and understanding of consent are not consistently embedded in the MASH. While parental consent to undertake further enquiries is considered and sought by most staff, all staff need to ensure that parents have clarity about what it is they are consenting to.
4. When safeguarding concerns are identified, children's cases are transferred without delay for immediate consideration by the duty and assessment teams. Strategy meetings are held, attended by multi-agency partners. Appropriate information is shared, with children's full circumstances considered, including

the circumstances of siblings, to formulate plans to safeguard children's welfare.

5. Children's needs are assessed without delay and they are visited quickly, with their views and wishes informing next steps. Assessments are comprehensive and contain necessary information about children's histories and current experiences, including routine education, health and other safeguarding partner checks, to inform analysis and planning.
6. Subsequent child in need and child protection plans result in a positive difference being made to children's lives. Plans are clear about the concerns and what parents need to do to bring about positive change. Multidisciplinary family safeguarding teams work skilfully with families, coordinating advice, teaching and support to address the significant harm that domestic abuse, poor mental health, neglect and substance misuse cause to children. As a result, families are given good opportunities to address the challenges in their lives to break often inter-generationally entrenched patterns and sustain change in the longer term for children. Social workers work effectively to engage parents and carers, to support children to remain at home where it is safe for them to do so.
7. Management oversight of services is robust. Social workers feel supported and receive regular individual and joint supervision to review children's progress. While there is some variability in the recording of supervision, including timescales for completion of actions, helpful checks and balances are in place. Experienced child protection officers monitor practice, such as timeliness of visits, core group meetings and recording. Progress is tracked between reviews to help ensure that children's situations and care improve within the right timescales.
8. Children are visited regularly so that they are helped to build positive relationships with their workers. Purposeful and creative direct work is undertaken to help ensure that children are at the centre of planning.
9. Parents are actively involved in creating plans for children, including safety plans, so they are more personal and have greater impact. Reviews and core groups are well attended by parents and professionals. Plans are mostly well written and focus on the areas that need to change to bring improvement to children's lives.
10. Disabled children benefit from comprehensive and detailed assessments. Relevant professionals are consulted, to enable a clear understanding of children's often very complex needs. When children are unable to communicate verbally, social workers take time to get to know them to understand their relationships, wishes and feelings.

11. When risks to children do not reduce through child protection planning, children appropriately become subject to pre-proceedings, to reinforce the changes needed to keep them safe. However, some of these children have been waiting too long for positive change.
12. The quality of letters to parents to inform them of pre-proceedings is variable. While concerns are mostly made clear, the changes parents need to make are not always explicit. Letters are often not individualised to the parent concerned and language is not sensitively considered. This means parents may not always be clear about what is being asked of them.
13. When children are at risk of being exploited, thorough assessments are carried out by workers who engage well with children. Appropriate action is taken to clearly identify risks and seek to reduce them. However, when multi-agency strategy meetings are held, timescales of these actions are not always clear.
14. When children go missing, return home interviews are not always completed to a consistent quality so that the reasons for children going missing are understood and inform effective safety planning. Most interviews are timely, but some interviews lack depth and detail. However, when children are missing, staff take the necessary action in seeking to keep them safe. Daily intelligence meetings with police and health partners ensure that there is effective oversight of children's needs.
15. Children aged 16 and 17 who are either homeless or at risk of being homeless are helped to live within their families and communities where possible or are provided with accommodation. Responses are proportionate and timely, and children's wishes and feelings are evident in assessment and planning. Children's support needs are holistically considered and advocates are routinely offered. Social workers talk with children about their entitlements under sections 20 and 17 of the Children Act 1989. However, children are not provided with sufficient information to take away to help them make informed decisions and seek advice if necessary. If arrangements are made for children under section 17 of the 1989 Children Act, children do not consistently have an up-to-date child in need plan to measure how well their needs are being met.
16. The team of local authority designated officers robustly oversees the management of allegations about adults who work with children. Decisions are made in a timely manner and risk is managed effectively.
17. Arrangements for children in private fostering arrangements are such that their welfare needs are understood and met well. Children's voices and wishes, obtained through regular visits, inform assessments and planning. If additional needs are identified, children are supported through early help services or child in need plans. The appointment of a dedicated private fostering social worker has improved this service for children. The number of children in private fostering arrangements in Lancashire is low and, consequently, internal and external awareness-raising is planned.

18. Children who are not in school are on the children missing education register and are monitored regularly. The local authority meets the minimum statutory standards for children who are electively home educated. Beyond this, however, the local authority is reliant on concerns being raised by partner agencies or others about this potentially vulnerable and sometimes hidden group of children.

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

19. When children need to come into care, these decisions are mostly timely and appropriate. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported appropriately by the local authority and their holistic needs are met well.
20. Most children live in homes which are permanent and secure, which helps them develop lasting relationships. Decisions about their permanence are promptly considered and reviewed. Children who have returned home and who are placed with their parents have updated assessments and are visited regularly.
21. Children who live in lasting homes (a term children in Lancashire prefer to be used) are helped to celebrate, so that they feel secure with their long-term families. However, a small number of children are waiting too long for permanence and stability, for example, those subject to placement with parent arrangements or in foster homes where a long-term decision has not been made.
22. Children in care are supported and visited regularly by social workers who know them well and who are, mostly, consistent adults in their lives. Experienced and skilled practitioners use a range of tools to undertake sensitive and constructive direct work to capture children's views, wishes and feelings and then incorporate these views in comprehensive and well-written plans.
23. Children benefit from effective oversight of their care and challenge to other professionals by managers and their independent reviewing officers to ensure that they have positive experiences and achieve progress. Their care plans and reviews are sensitively written and reflect children's views and those of their parents and carers.
24. Children live in a range of homes that meet their needs and are placed with their brothers and sisters where possible. Disabled children experience stability in either foster or residential homes and make positive progress. Children enjoy a variety of activities and hobbies to widen their horizons and build confidence. Family time is encouraged and supported where appropriate for those children who live away from their families.

25. Opportunities for children to participate, be included and receive advocacy are positive and increasing. Children in care and care leavers enjoy attending meetings and participation events, including youth takeover days, care leavers' week and projects. Children in care and care leavers regularly contribute to service development.
26. Children in care who are moving towards adulthood are supported to prepare for greater independence. The local authority has invested in a bespoke housing project for children leaving care, to offer them extensive support in setting up home for the first time. A small number of children have started on this scheme, which offers a wraparound service, including therapeutic and peer support, so that they have the best opportunity to succeed in their new homes. While at an early stage of implementation, the project is showing positive signs of addressing care leavers' needs in a holistic way.
27. Practitioners and managers continue to be vigilant and alert to safeguarding concerns when children become looked after. Multi-agency strategy meetings are convened and protective action is taken. Responses to a small number of children who go missing and are at risk of exploitation are variable, mostly in relation to ensuring actions are undertaken promptly and are reviewed for their effectiveness.
28. When children come into care, their physical and emotional health needs are thoroughly assessed in a timely manner and these assessments are measured and reviewed as necessary to meet ongoing health needs. Children who then become care leavers have regular and meaningful communication with their personal advisers, who continue to provide this emotional and practical health support. Care leavers' health needs are identified and mostly met. However, due to a waiting list, a very small number of care leavers are not receiving the prompt service for emotional support that their personal advisers have assessed they need and help is not being sought elsewhere.
29. Too many care leavers do not have their full health histories, and so are not able to refer to and reflect on their health information when needed. The local authority is working with health partners to ensure that they provide this information, and to make clear to all professionals how they can support care leavers to access this information.
30. Children are supported well to make progress in education, so their future life chances are promoted. Children have good-quality personal education plans, which include their views. These plans are reviewed regularly so that children receive specific support, including counselling or direct work, or funding is agreed for more specialist services.
31. Although the vast majority of children live in suitable homes which meet their needs, a small but significant number of children with complex needs live in unregistered children's homes. These living arrangements do not give the

stability and safeguarding assurance that registered homes provide. Management oversight is significantly increased at every level due to children's high levels of vulnerability. The local authority actively encourages providers to register wherever appropriate. Senior managers are addressing the shortfall of suitable homes through a strategic sufficiency plan, including collaboration with health partners, although these plans are at an early stage of implementation.

32. When children cannot live with their parents, they are supported where possible to live with extended family or friends. These placements often move into special guardianship arrangements, as appropriate. Where complex special guardianship arrangements are in place, children are supported by a short-term child in need plan to monitor the initial implementation of the support plan. While special guardian families can access early help services and training, the extent of support groups and finances for this group of carers is variable. However, this gap is recognised by managers and is being addressed.
33. Early planning to ensure that children have long-term permanency through adoption is improving. While there is some delay for a minority of children up to the point of an adoption decision being reached, once at this point, the plan is accelerated quickly. Most children have moved to well-matched adopters, aided by family-finding through regional adoption agency arrangements, effective oversight by independent reviewing officers and managers, and regular meetings to track children's progress. Child permanence reports are of a good quality, written sensitively and including photos and extended family and health information.
34. Ensuring that children have the information they need to understand their life histories is given a high priority in Lancashire. Later-in-life letters and life-story work are of good quality and practice has been strengthened through recent conference training. Via video, children have been supported to explain their life-story experiences honestly, which enabled a powerful learning experience to help practitioners reflect and improve their skills in this area.
35. The fostering service has strengthened its supervision and support to foster carers. Supervising social workers have a good understanding of children's needs and provide child-centred support to foster carers. The successful development of 'fostering communities' provides foster carers and children with an additional support network. An increasing number of connected carers are approved as foster carers, allowing more children to grow up within their extended families.
36. The arrangements with the regional adoption agency (Adoption Lancashire and Blackpool) are working well. Adopters and children benefit from timely access to therapeutic services when this is needed.
37. From the age of 16, the majority of care leavers are well supported by their personal advisers, often up to the age of 25, to make good progress in their

lives. They are helped emotionally and practically to gain essential life skills as they move into adulthood.

38. Care leavers know their entitlements and benefit from a wide range of practical and financial support. The local authority's care leaver offer is comprehensive, accessible and regularly reviewed to reflect the changing needs of care leavers and the financial pressures they face.
39. As corporate parents, Lancashire Council celebrates care leavers' achievements, no matter how big or small. Care leavers are helped to overcome life's hurdles and adversities. They are encouraged to take part in a range of social, participation and consultation events, and managers and staff are actively working on increasing the numbers of young people who attend these. The views of care leavers are represented well by the active care leaver forum, whose members regularly attend corporate parenting board and whose views are used effectively to shape service delivery.
40. Many care leavers are involved in creating their own pathway plans, which reflect their needs, views and ambitions. Most plans are purposeful and regularly reviewed. However, for a very small number of care leavers, their plans are not updated when their needs and situations change, and actions do not focus on what matters most to help them make progress. Therefore, it is harder for care leavers to understand when reading their plans why decisions have been made, particularly if they decide to view their files at a later stage.
41. Care leavers are well supported in their education, employment and training. While this is a priority area of focus for senior leaders, they recognise that, while numbers are gradually increasing, there is more to do to improve the numbers of care leavers accessing education, employment or training. A well-thought-out and coordinated strategy is in place to provide advice and support at an earlier stage for children in care and care leavers, with assistance from specialist employment advisers.
42. The majority of care leavers live in a range of stable and suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Helpful support is available across council services and from partners for the very small number of care leavers who are homeless or live in temporary accommodation, to help them move to more suitable accommodation. The recently introduced lasting homes panel is having a positive impact on identifying housing options, tenancy support and outreach, as well as increased management oversight for those who need extra help.

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

43. Based on strong leadership from the outgoing director, senior leaders, managers and practitioners have created a positive and open culture of learning

and commitment to promote the best interests of children. Senior leaders work closely with local politicians, who are child-focused and ensure that they are fully appraised on the strategic priorities for children. There has been significant investment and support at a corporate level, from the chief executive and members as well as close working with strategic partners, to improve services for children. External funding has been creatively secured to benefit children and families, and to strengthen the workforce.

44. As corporate parents, Lancashire Council supports and cares for their care leavers well. Children and care leavers are engaged in corporate parenting board meetings where their views are clearly articulated. The board is appropriately focused on issues that influence the well-being of children in care and care leavers. A number of care leaver apprentices are employed by the council and their successes are celebrated.
45. The implementation of the local authority's chosen multidisciplinary practice model is now rooted in family safeguarding teams across the county. Safeguarding workbooks form an electronic system to incorporate all practice recording and evidence in one place. These are seen by staff as a positive tool, although the mechanisms for producing these workbooks are still being embedded in the workforce.
46. Working positively with children, parents and carers to improve services is important to the local authority, both operationally and strategically. Feedback from children and families is valued. This includes feedback from the parents' panel for family safeguarding, and an innovative service delivered by a care experienced staff member who gathers feedback directly from families who have experienced services provided by the MASH.
47. Senior leaders are clearly sighted on areas of strategic priority. They recognise the growing detrimental impact of all forms of exploitation on children and the need to reduce social workers' caseloads in this area of work. A review of the council's contextual safeguarding teams and services is at the midway stage, aiming to increase capacity and develop the multidisciplinary approach to tackling the problem for this highly vulnerable group of children.
48. The local authority is experiencing challenges in the sufficiency of homes for all children. A small number of children who have very complex needs live in unregistered children's homes, and therefore do not have additional regulatory oversight to protect them. Additionally, there are a very small number of care leavers who live in temporary accommodation, which further increases their vulnerability. For these groups of children and young people, increased management oversight, partnership working and support are in place to help them move to suitable accommodation as soon as possible.
49. Learning from good practice is important to this local authority. Sharing good practice and working with other local authorities, through peer reviews and

audit evaluations, have supported good practice and the embedding in the service of the front door and family safeguarding services. A robust and extensive performance management framework enables the local authority to accurately identify most practice areas that need development and auditing activities provide a clear picture of the impact of their work for children. Learning from audits is filtered through the workforce to support practice improvement. Helpful and easy-to-read one-page briefings are produced to facilitate discussion during practitioner team meetings.

50. Management oversight of practice is evident at all tiers and managers use supervision effectively to maintain oversight of decision-making and practice. Supervision in family safeguarding teams is a strength. Business support and technology are creatively used to capture reflective multidisciplinary supervision discussions in these teams, so that the reasons behind decisions and plans are well recorded and understood.
51. The local authority has a comprehensive workforce development programme and has created an environment of learning, training and career progression for staff, whose health and well-being are well supported. The positive culture of the organisation encourages staff to stay, develop and progress. A range of recruitment and retention initiatives are in place that are working well to reduce the number of vacancies and increase workforce stability.
52. Staff feel listened to and valued in this local authority. The loyal and committed workforce are proud to work for Lancashire and are determined to do the best for children, often going over and above. Staff have opportunities to listen to and consult with accessible leaders and managers so they can contribute to service development and improvement to meet children's needs.

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