

Inspection of Hertfordshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 January 2023

Lead inspector: Sarah Canto, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the previous inspection four years ago, when Ofsted judged Hertfordshire County Council's children's services to be good, the local authority has continued to strengthen services for children. Children in Hertfordshire benefit from consistently high-quality and effective support. Hertfordshire's early help service and family safeguarding teams make a positive difference for children, identifying and tackling need early on and reducing the number of children who need to come into care. When children do need to come into care, they benefit from excellent care and support.

Working alongside a highly effective director of children's services and her capable senior leadership team, the local authority's corporate and political leaders prioritise the needs of children. They take their corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously and champion children's services across the council and with partner agencies. Leaders are ambitious for Hertfordshire's children. Rigorous self-evaluation and effective performance management underpin a drive for continuous improvement. This has supported the local authority in widening the application of their multi-agency strength-based model across services, enabling more children to benefit from this approach. Leaders know their services well and are working to improve the consistency with which referrals are managed.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness and quality of some referrals, including the establishing of parental consent by partner agencies.
- Supervision and management oversight of practice in care leavers services.
- Support to enable care leavers to access and understand their health histories.

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

1. Children in Hertfordshire receive the right level of support at the right time. Practitioners undertake focused direct work with children and ensure that children's and families' experiences and views inform assessments and plans. Comprehensive early help assessments are completed. A range of practitioners with specific roles carry out focused work, with appropriate oversight and supervision. The resulting plans are thorough in identifying needs, actions, clarity of role and responsibility and timescales. When children's circumstances improve or there are increased concerns, smooth transitions between early help and statutory services lead to families receiving support at the right level, ensuring that risk is escalated appropriately. This enables families to understand the nature of the concerns and what help is being offered.
2. Children who need help and protection are referred appropriately to 'The Gateway', Hertfordshire's 'front door', so that their needs and risks can be assessed. Timely decisions about next steps are made for children. Social workers consider family history, including previous interventions and current involvement. This careful assessment supports accurate recommendations and decision-making about the best way to help children.
3. When children are experiencing domestic abuse in their families, social workers respond to these concerns both appropriately and quickly. For most children, there are clear pathways in place that ensure that they receive an effective and timely response. For some children, partner agencies are not quick enough to refer into 'The Gateway'. This can delay help being provided to these children.
4. Partner agencies are not always consistent in gaining consent from parents before contacting the local authority. In these instances, families are not prepared for a contact from children's social care. When social workers receive referrals, they seek appropriate consent from parents before making enquiries with agencies about their children.
5. Most children receive a timely response when they need support from the out-of-hours service. However, for a small number of children who are experiencing family crisis, the response can be too slow. There are strong links between the out-of-hours and the daytime social work teams. This means that when families need support, they do not have to repeat their information and there are

already contingency plans developed between the two services to minimise disruption to children.

6. Children at risk of significant harm receive a prompt response. Strategy meetings have strong multi-agency participation and result in clear information-sharing, decision-making and action planning. Subsequent child protection enquiries are timely and thorough.
7. Assessment work for children in need is of a high quality. It is both thorough and timely. Careful review of risk and support leads to a considered approach to working with families. Children are regularly seen throughout the assessment process and understanding of their experiences and wishes is gained through direct work, using a range of methods. Families know what the concerns are and how these are being addressed.
8. Children in need receive strong and coordinated multidisciplinary support. Nearly all children's plans are detailed, clearly identify risk and set out the child's and family's support needs. The plans establish actions and timescales and these are overseen and reviewed through regular, well-attended multi-agency meetings. The multidisciplinary work in the family safeguarding teams is strong. It supports both a comprehensive approach to family needs and the progression of children's plans, leading to improved outcomes for children.
9. Children and families are regularly visited by social workers and practitioners, so that workers know them well. Child practitioners carry out skilled direct work that meets the child's individual needs and enables the social worker to better understand the child's world.
10. Children's assessments and plans are reviewed effectively by managers to ensure that the right service provision is being given and plans are being progressed. Social workers receive regular, reflective supervision that reviews both the needs of the child and the actions needed to ensure that the plan is being progressed effectively. The group supervision model is highly effective, and ensures that the child's and family's all-round needs are considered from a multi-agency perspective.
11. Children at significant risk are responded to quickly through the application of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Plans are progressed with regular senior management oversight but, for a few children, the assessment planning is too slow.
12. Pre-proceedings letters to parents accurately explain what the concerns are about the care of their children and what needs to change to keep their children safe. However, the letters are not personalised and do not align with the relationship-based approach that the local authority uses to achieve the best outcomes for children. Prior to this inspection, senior leaders had already recognised this problem and have been taking action to resolve it. Parents are actively involved in pre-proceedings meetings. They are helped to understand

the local authority's concerns although some of the resulting written plans are not always specific enough.

13. Most disabled children in need receive timely support. Through the use of advocates and mentors, workers skilfully ascertain children's wishes and feelings. The plans for children are progressed through regular, well-attended multi-agency meetings. For most children, these meetings capture the voice of the child.
14. Children experiencing exploitation are supported by dedicated and experienced workers who are persistent in their attempts to engage, support and protect them from harm. Children benefit from a range of bespoke and specialist services that offer high-level intensive support when required to protect them. When children are at risk, joined-up working between services ensures that children receive support while their assessment of risk is being completed, resulting in effective reduction of risk.
15. Most children aged 16 to 17 who are homeless are quickly informed of their rights. They receive a thorough joint assessment that gives a clear understanding of their needs. For some children, however, their access to practical support is slowed down by the assessment process. The plans that are developed from these assessments are not always specific enough to meet all the children's support needs. Strong partnership working between housing and children's services ensures that for most children, their accommodation needs are identified and joint plans are put in place.
16. Children who live in private fostering arrangements make positive progress. Thorough assessments of the arrangements are quickly undertaken to achieve clear analysis and recommendations. Children are well supported by social workers and their views are regularly obtained.
17. Effective arrangements are in place to respond promptly to allegations against adults who work with children. The response to risk is both appropriate and proportionate. The service provides training that enhances multi-agency protective services for children.
18. An effective system identifies children who are missing from education. While numbers of children who are not attending school are increasing, successful engagement with more families has enabled children to re-enter education. A small minority of children have been missing from education for an extended period and efforts to secure education for them have not yet been successful.
19. Efforts are made to maintain the lines of communication with parents who wish to educate their children at home. Leaders know who these children are and collect information about parents' reasons for home education. The team is proactive in its duty to safeguard children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

20. Children come into care at the right time to keep them safe and promote their welfare. High-quality assessments inform this decision-making. Social workers keep children at the centre of the work being undertaken to support them. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, known in this authority as separated migrant children, retain their allocated social worker from the point of assessment, so that they have greater consistency of support.
21. Permanence planning is actively considered for children at the earliest opportunity to secure their futures, including the possibility of early permanence. Concurrent planning is used effectively to reduce potential delays for children in finding the right home. When there is a delay in achieving permanence, this is purposeful and well explained so that children reviewing their records will be able to understand why this happened.
22. The effective use of family group conferences identifies potential carers as well as friends and family links within children's wider network and community. Work to assess the suitability of potential carers is sensitively completed, navigating any complex issues effectively with the provision of specific support and training.
23. Practitioners and managers are committed to enabling children to return home whenever this is the plan, underpinned by thorough assessments. The voices of older children inform the plan and the subsequent support to help the move be successful. There is the right level of oversight of identified risk. When the plan has worked well, there is timely consideration of applying for the revocation of care orders. A multidisciplinary intensive support team, 'Building Bridges', is being piloted to achieve reunification for those children whose family has achieved the necessary change for children to return home to their care. Although at an early stage of implementation, the team's work has already led to positive change for some children's family-time arrangements.
24. Strong oversight of children looked after, including disabled children, ensures that their plans are regularly monitored and progressed. Independent reviewing officers are consistent people in children's lives, who seek their views and involve them in their care planning. Some children chair their own reviews. Plans are detailed and independent reviewing officers check in with children and their workers to ensure that they are being progressed effectively. Strong multi-agency working ensures that children's all-round needs are being met effectively. Independence needs and preparation for adulthood are identified early for the majority of children. Multi-agency transition planning supports the early creation of a support plan as children move into adulthood.
25. Experienced and skilled social workers and child practitioners talk enthusiastically and affectionately about children who they know well. Visits are timely and purposeful. Children looked after receive sensitive and targeted

social work intervention. This work is captured in detailed records, which include well-constructed life-story work and later-life letters.

26. Leaders have expanded the range of homes for children, particularly so that children can continue to live in their home area. This has entailed working with motivated, child-focused foster carers and providing therapeutic training and support. There is excellent joined-up working between teams, adopters and foster carers to provide children with positive experiences that are in their best interests, underpinned by consistent and comprehensive support from professionals.
27. Children live in stable, long-term homes which meet their individual needs and support them to flourish. Where possible, children live with their brothers and sisters. Arrangements for children to maintain their identity and keep in touch with people who are important to them are handled and explained sensitively. Children therefore understand their arrangements and know what to expect. Young people preparing to leave care are encouraged to participate in lifelong links work, with the aim of identifying and securing long-lasting relationships and support for them well into adulthood. This support often includes previous foster carers.
28. When a child lives in a children's home that is not registered, due to the local authority being unable to identify suitable regulated accommodation, arrangements are well monitored. Direct work and management oversight are evident and providers are strongly encouraged to progress registration. This was the case for one child at the time of the inspection. The overall use of such provision is very low.
29. Children's safety is promoted, including for those at risk of exploitation. They benefit from a range of preventative services to address and reduce risks.
30. A small number of children actively participate in the Children in Care Council and have been involved in a range of projects. Several children and young people have participated in the recruitment of senior leaders. Children and young people understand the purpose of the group in getting their voice across and contributing to service development. There is effective consultation with children on an individual basis in order to gain their views to inform practice. Children's achievements are celebrated through award events, which are enjoyed by all who attend.
31. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements and steps are taken to ensure that older children know how their actions in the present might affect their future.
32. Leaders of the virtual school work exceptionally well with schools and a variety of professional services to achieve the best possible outcomes for children in care. Leaders closely monitor children's achievements and progress. They ensure that barriers to attending school are removed. Children who are at risk

of exclusion receive timely and effective support. As a result, there have been no permanent exclusions of children looked after for over five years. The emphasis on providing enrichment activities through residential, trips, masterclasses and workshops is helping to broaden horizons. All children in care are given the opportunity to learn a musical instrument. Workers and carers ensure that children have lots of opportunities to pursue their interests and develop new ones.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

33. Young people who have left care are supported by experienced and enthusiastic personal advisers who know them well and advocate strongly on their behalf. Personal advisers work hard to develop relationships and are sensitive about young people's individual needs, enabling the development of positive relationships.
34. Young people are encouraged to remain living with foster families in 'staying put' arrangements when possible, and to maintain positive relationships with previous carers after they have moved into their own accommodation. Young people are supported well to see family members and others who are important to them, to help them feel as secure as possible.
35. Young people have access to care leaver hubs and are supported when attending for the first time. Here they can receive help with money, cooking, CVs and job applications, but the uptake is limited at present, due to geographical location and transport links.
36. Care leavers who are parents can access weekly support through the popular and well run 'Ohana' parenting group. Volunteers and coordinators operate a highly supportive and successful group, which helps to increase parental confidence as well as providing opportunities for socialisation and support for small children. Care leaver parents have developed highly positive and supportive relationships with their champion volunteers, which enhance their lives and the lives of their children.
37. A small number of care leavers are involved with the children in care and care leavers group in initiatives such as 'Project Positive', to raise young people's aspirations, and commissioning activities and have been part of the interview panel for the director of children's services.
38. Young people receive support to attend health appointments, including checks with dentists and opticians. Social workers for children looked after instigate procedures so that young people can have access to a summary of their health histories. However, staff in the care leaver service were not consistently aware of these summaries or where to find them, in order to continue to support care leavers with this important information for their future lives.

39. Young people can access a variety of emotional well-being services and leaders are working to further enhance this offer. Some young people said that the support they receive has improved but indicated that training for staff in relation to emotional well-being, in particular, could be better. The local authority is currently recruiting two mental health workers for the care leavers service, as a result of strong partnership working with health services to secure joint funding.
40. Pathway plans are mainly developed with young people. While plans are clear about needs and views, some are more general in terms of actions and timescales and who is responsible for helping to achieve actions.
41. Young people are aware of their entitlements. The care leaver offer is explained to young people by their workers, and a care experienced employee is currently compiling an easy-to-read guide to the offer. Care leavers do not automatically qualify for financial support to access Wi-Fi, although individual requests are usually agreed. Hertfordshire and the 10 district councils do not offer council tax exemptions.
42. Most young people experience positive transitions, including support to assist them with moving towards becoming independent. Children looked after workers and care leavers' workers work closely together to support young people with early applications for housing and benefits where applicable. Young people receive high-quality careers advice and opportunities to engage in a range of work and training initiatives to help them fulfil their ambitions. Young people are supported to have the key documentation that they need to be independent.
43. The care leaver service provides continuity of workers for children and young people who have experienced trauma in their journey to the UK. When there is a change of worker, a comprehensive handover takes place, so that young people do not have to tell their story twice.
44. Most young people live in accommodation of their choice. When young people move between temporary homes, their personal advisers have found it hard to help them maintain consistent and suitable living arrangements. While care leavers have a level of priority for district council tenancies, they sometimes still have to wait between four and eight months to be allocated a home.
45. There is good oversight of the provision of post-16 accommodation, within a clear framework aligned to the planned future national registration requirements. However, managers are aware that children in some commissioned semi-independent accommodation are only able to stay for four weeks after their 18th birthday. Leaders are developing plans to resolve this challenge.
46. Risks to young people are considered through an individualised assessment process, to support the identification of those more vulnerable young people.

When risks escalate, young people's circumstances are discussed at multi-agency risk meetings. However, for the few care leavers who are living in particularly vulnerable situations and in temporary accommodation, increased management oversight is not always evident in order to ensure that their needs are thoroughly considered. Young people's positive relationships with their personal advisers mean that these more vulnerable young people do generally keep in touch and respond to workers' calls and visits.

47. Most young people are actively supported by their workers and the virtual school with their education and employment plans. Leaders of the virtual school help prepare young people for when they leave care. An impressive number of young people have progressed successfully into higher education.
48. The quality and frequency of supervision for staff is not consistent across care leaver services. However, despite a manager vacancy, staff say they feel supported and can access on-call managers for advice and consultation.
49. Some episodes of staff absence in the care leaver service have created inconsistency of workers for some care leavers. Additionally, due to higher caseloads, albeit temporarily, a small number of care leavers have not had the consistent level of support and attention that they would normally receive. A recent restructure has sought to achieve greater consistency for care leavers of all ages.
50. Some personal advisers have accessed training in motivational interviewing, which has had a positive impact on helping staff to understand the process of change for young people.

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

51. Children benefit from strong corporate and political engagement in a culture of high support and challenge in Hertfordshire. Financial investment for children has been significant, partnership relationships are strong and leaders have a clear vision for the future. Corporate parenting has been emphasised across the whole council, to highlight that children are everyone's business. The Integrated Care Partnership plan has now incorporated 'best start for life' as one of its top priorities. This corporate commitment has helped services to improve from the already good standards found at the last inspection.
52. The strategic plan for children and families spans all levels of children's services, incorporating leadership priorities which filter down to the work with families and the setting of individual outcomes against these targets.
53. Elected members are fully informed of the progress and experiences of children by senior leaders, and they provide effective challenge. Councillors make it their business to get to know children and staff and increase their understanding of children's services. The chief executive, director and lead member have clear

oversight on those children or young people who are most vulnerable, for example children in unregistered children's homes who are not protected by regulatory safeguards.

54. A whole-day event, which took place in the council chambers and was chaired by young people, scrutinised the impact of services for children, with further reviews planned to improve services.
55. Helping children and young people to reach their potential in learning and training is important to leaders and managers. They are proud of the 100% A-level pass rate of children in care, the high numbers of care leavers who go on to higher education and the five-year record of no permanent exclusions for children looked after. However, leaders know they can do more to increase the numbers of care leavers who are in education, training and employment. This work has started with raising the profile of corporate parenting across the council and, in doing so, opening up opportunities across the wider council and local businesses in order to increase apprenticeship opportunities. Initiatives have started with the virtual school to equip children from an early age to reach their potential, for example piloted youth support in secondary schools to provide mentoring and coaching.
56. Leaders continually look for, and identify, areas for improvement and development to enhance and expand the services that children and families receive. Gaps in placement sufficiency are being addressed by effective changes to residential and fostering services to meet the needs of children with the most complex needs. Increased fostering provision in the local area has boosted placement stability rates, so that children live in settled homes and feel secure about their futures.
57. The local authority's long-standing relationship-based practice model is strongly embedded in Hertfordshire's service provision. This multidisciplinary practice approach has improved outcomes for children. Its success has led to leaders extending parts of the model across wider service areas, such as introducing sexual abuse practitioners who start their work with children at an earlier stage in assessment teams.
58. The 'Building Bridges' team is a recent innovation in the children looked after and care leavers team. This team is based on the recognition that some children who have been in care for some time need to be given the opportunity to reunite with their families safely, and to strengthen relationships. 'Lifelong links' is another innovative programme, benefiting children and care leavers by helping them to establish lasting relationships.
59. A parent care leaver group, which is very well run and popular with those who attend, has a positive impact on enhancing young people's well-being and reducing isolation. Children and young people have renamed and co-produced the corporate parenting strategy as 'Our Exciting Life Changing plan'. Leaders are seeking to further build on children's and young people's participation,

increased incorporation of their voices to shape services and support groups for children in care, such as those for separated migrant young people.

60. Leaders monitor performance closely and respond agilely to resolve problems, such as the impact of increased demand on 'The Gateway'. Senior leaders and partners have secured funding and are midway through a redesign of the front door, with the launch of the new model due in March 2023. External review and expertise have been used to inform this redesign, and incremental change has been made along the way to address capacity and consistency issues.
61. The local authority's performance management framework is robust and demonstrates an accurate understanding of the quality of practice. Managers have a range of systems to monitor impact both at an individual level and at a wider level across services. For the most part, the areas that inspectors found needed development had already been identified by the local authority.
62. Leaders model reflection and learning across the local authority. Social workers and practitioners have described managers at all levels of the service as visible and approachable, and they welcome the regular drop-in sessions for staff with senior leaders.
63. Social workers enjoy working in Hertfordshire and find their work rewarding. Those new to the authority feel welcomed and supported. The culture is positive and this positivity is reflected in the workplace. Practitioners enjoy collaborative and reflective working approaches as they spend more time in the office. Staff and managers benefit from a comprehensive workforce development offer with clear career pathways. Structured support, for newly qualified workers through to leadership and development training for new and existing managers, equips staff to carry out their roles effectively. What shone through was social workers' and practitioners' commitment to children, how well they know them and the positive relationships they have with children.

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