

Inspection of Derbyshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 30 October to 10 November 2023

Lead inspector: John Roughton, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection, and particularly the subsequent focused visits, the issues identified by Ofsted have been much improved and strong progress made in those areas identified as requiring improvement. All children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are now quickly assessed through a joint children's social care and housing homeless pathway assessment. The local authority has worked diligently across teams and services to identify privately fostered children, raise awareness of their existence, and improve the quality of practice for these children. Effective arrangements in the Starting Point service are seeing the prompt progression of new referrals, and strategy meetings are held quickly and are both well attended and recorded. Personal education plans (PEPs) are routinely reviewed, and most children receive a timely initial health assessment when they enter care. While management oversight and supervision are evident, they are not yet consistently demonstrating sufficient rigour and purpose in supporting practice improvement and ensuring the prompt progression of plans.

Political leaders are highly supportive of the children's agenda. Despite the financial pressures the council faces, investment in strengthening services in response to increased demand is a continuing commitment. The senior leadership of Derbyshire County Council recognises and prioritises the needs of its children. The managing

director of the council and the executive director of children's services have a clear understanding and grip of the main challenges they face in improving the lives of their most vulnerable children.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of management oversight and supervision in driving practice improvement.
- Increasing the ambition and achievements for older care leavers not in education, training and employment.
- Increasing sufficiency to avoid the use of unregistered children's homes or supported accommodation.
- Effective and consistent provision of life-story work.

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

1. Children in Derbyshire benefit from an array of early help services commissioned locally and delivered by skilled staff across six diverse localities. Children are allocated promptly to locality-based early help practitioners. For most children and their parents, the impact and outcomes of sensitive individual and group work are positive.
2. Responses to children at immediate risk of harm are timely and effective. Thresholds of risk, need and harm to children are understood and applied by experienced and knowledgeable workers from across the partnership. Daily screening of referrals by social workers is timely and work is progressed and passed promptly to the locality teams.
3. Timely strategy meetings are used constructively to share relevant information about children and result in swift actions and joint enquiries when required. Police, health and probation partners have recently strengthened the rigour of partnership work in this area. Child protection strategy meetings are highlighting potential risks to children with greater specificity, including those held out of hours. A high volume of domestic abuse referrals are received by children's social care from the police and a variety of initiatives, including Pitstop meetings, are starting to reduce that volume.
4. Children in need and those subject to child protection plans are visited and seen regularly by skilled locality-based social workers who know them well. Social work caseloads in some localities are too high, and this lack of capacity correlates with less-effective practice for some children.

5. Most statutory assessments written directly to children are of good quality, leading to clear plans. Staff understand the impact that intergenerational trauma, poverty, debt and unstable housing has on families. Most child protection work with disabled children is vigilant, child-focused and impactful. However, for a small number of disabled children, inspectors identified insufficient recognition of increasing risks. Leaders had already identified and begun to respond to this through quality assurance activity and targeted training.
6. Strenuous and effective efforts are made to include fathers and stepfathers in children's plans when it is safe to do so. Thorough risk assessments are completed. This results in male carers appropriately sharing care, or assuming sole care of children, preventing the need for them to enter care.
7. Core groups and child in need (CIN) review meetings are held regularly and most update the progress and impact of work in relation to key plan objectives. They are well attended by involved professionals. Partners contribute effectively, with records showing reports from general practitioners (GPs) and attendance at meetings by schools, health visitors, midwives and specialist drug workers. For a small number of children, the level of risk analysis in assessment summaries is limited and does not demonstrate enough professional curiosity.
8. Most CIN and child protection plans are concise and clear. Children are seen regularly, and children's voices are listened to, acted on and used to inform decisions. Partnership working with health colleagues and the quality of pre-birth assessments and plans are ensuring that babies' needs are well understood, and appropriate and timely responses made when risks are identified.
9. Social workers and managers act swiftly when there is significant concern or risks to children increase. Concurrent work for children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is preventing drift and ensuring timely decisions about applications to family courts.
10. Emerging risks to children and young people missing from home and care or at risk of exploitation are identified early using effective screening tools. Individual children at risk of exploitation or who go missing are appropriately assessed by the multi-agency partnership, at strategic and locality levels. Established professional partnerships and good management support and challenge at all levels strengthen the response to risk across localities. Strong partnership working with the police and effective use of legal measures and disruption activity are ensuring that criminally exploited children are not criminalised themselves.
11. There is a joint homeless protocol between children's social care and housing to ensure that all children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are quickly assessed. These young people are made aware of their rights and enabled to live in accommodation appropriate to their needs.

12. Privately fostered children are well assessed, regularly visited and supported, along with their carers.
13. The number of children who are electively home educated is steadily rising. The local authority has strengthened its oversight of this group of children, particularly those who are vulnerable. Any children who are not in receipt of a suitable educational provision are referred promptly to the Children Missing Education team to respond.
14. Recent changes to the team responsible for children missing education are beginning to make a positive difference. However, there are still some significant challenges, particularly in relation to the number of children who only attend school part time and the availability of suitable placements for vulnerable children.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

15. Most children in care live in loving homes which meet their needs well. They enjoy positive relationships with their social workers, who see them regularly and have a good understanding of their needs. Wherever viable, children are supported to maintain strong relationships with their birth families.
16. Children enter care when it is in their best interests, both in emergency and planned circumstances.
17. Children are visited regularly by their social workers in accordance with their individual needs. Many records of these visits are detailed and thoughtfully written to children. However, the purpose and goals of visits are not always clear and not aligned with care plan objectives.
18. Family time with children's birth families, including their fathers, is carefully considered and facilitated in children's best interests.
19. Careful, phased planning ensures that most children who return home to their parents do so successfully and sustainably.
20. Social workers prepare informative update reports for children's review meetings. Children participate in their meetings. Independent reviewing officer (IRO) review records are well written directly to children, helping them understand their circumstances and care plans. In the main, regular IRO scrutiny and oversight of the progress of review decisions reduces delays through challenge and escalation when required.
21. Considerable efforts are made to try and match children with the right homes. Nearly all children live reasonably close to their home areas, either in the county or in adjacent local authorities. Providing sufficient placements is highly challenging, but viable plans are in place to try and increase capacity, both in the short and longer term.

22. A small number of children aged 16 and 17 who are subject to deprivation of liberty orders are living in unregistered children's homes. Quality assurance and senior manager oversight of these children is rigorous. However, senior leaders recognise that they need to evidence this consistently in children's files and ensure that social workers are visiting these most vulnerable children with greater purpose and frequency.
23. Early permanence planning for children is strong. Effective, authoritative social work in pre-proceedings and care proceedings is resulting in timely permanence plans for children. There are a small number of children living in long-term foster homes who have not had their permanency approved through formal panel matching, leaving them uncertain as to their future care. A few children have had many changes of placement before they live with well-matched foster carers.
24. Many children in care appropriately and safely live with kinship carers. This is a particular strength in Derbyshire. A high number of connected carers and foster carers later secure special guardianship orders (SGOs). SGO support plans help promote and sustain these permanent arrangements for children. Children are safely placed with their parents when it is appropriate.
25. Many children make good progress in foster care. This is due to the dedication and skill of their foster carers, who are well supported by experienced social workers.
26. Life-story work is often referenced as an important need, but it is too often delayed, and some children are not helped to understand why they are in care.
27. Derbyshire is a member of a regional adoption agency (Adoption East Midlands). Children benefit from a strong adoption service in Derbyshire led by experienced and confident managers. Following a positive experience, some adopters have come forward to adopt again.
28. A small number of children with complex and acute mental health difficulties are provided with effective and timely help. However, the position for most children in care is mixed. Many children have to wait too long for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), whether they live inside or outside the county. Senior leaders in the council are aware of this and are attempting to mitigate these gaps through bespoke commissioning. Many children are not receiving therapeutic help soon enough to help them overcome earlier adversities and abusive experiences.
29. Children's physical health needs receive close attention. Health reviews are timely and health professionals work well with other parties to ensure that children are in good health.
30. Prompt and effective responses are evident when children go missing. Return home interviews, strategy and multi-agency missing and exploitation meetings

produce effective safety plans. Direct work with children helps to reduce risks of exploitation.

31. The virtual school team is aspirational for children in care. The team works hard with schools, including those out of county, to ensure that they have the resources they need to help children achieve positive outcomes. Most PEPs are of good quality. However, the quality of education accessed through alternative provision is too variable.
32. Children enjoy a range of sporting and leisure activities that are actively facilitated and promoted by their social workers and carers. This provides them with enriching and fulfilling experiences promoting their social and emotional development.
33. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children are supported in suitable accommodation, mainly in nearby cities where they have ready access to their cultural communities. Some are having to wait too long to access English for speakers of other languages courses in local colleges.
34. At a locality level, managers know their children well and speak knowledgeably about them and the challenges they face. A small number of children attend monthly alternate physical and virtual 'first generation' meetings (Children in Care Council). These are augmented by a range of additional participation activities through which a larger number of children are helped to express their views and questions to corporate parents. Children feel they are heard and most of their proposals are followed up, demonstrating purposeful participation.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

35. Services for care-experienced young people in Derbyshire are now highly effective following the decision to bring the service back in house. Care-experienced young people benefit from developing warm, nurturing relationships with their leaving care workers. Staff are committed, ambitious and determined, helping children and young people to remain safe and reach their potential.
36. Leaving care workers (personal advisers) are allocated when children in care reach 16, working alongside social workers and building positive relationships with young people, ensuring a seamless transition as they reach adulthood. Young people have regular contact with their workers. They feel cared for, with one describing their relationship with their worker as 'feeling like a family'.
37. Pathway plans are well written in the young person's voice, and they document the young person's diverse and unique needs with sensitivity and warmth. Actions are very clear and regularly reviewed. Workers actively follow up tasks for young people with pace and intention to get things done quickly for them.
38. Care-experienced young people co-produced the leaving care offer and are enabled to have a good understanding of their entitlements. These are also well

reflected in pathway plans. All care-experienced young people have their council tax paid for them up to 25 years of age, including those living outside the county. They also receive valued help with their water bills. Young people are routinely helped to register with GPs, dentists and opticians and there is a positive focus on ensuring that their health needs are met.

39. There are strong corporate efforts and initiatives to involve young people in a range of participation activities. Their achievements are recognised and celebrated, and young people are regularly involved in the co-design of their services, and on interview panels when recruiting new staff in children's services.
40. Young people are living in housing they describe as safe and meeting their needs. Where appropriate, young people benefit from 'staying put' arrangements so they can remain with their foster carers when they reach adulthood.
41. Care-experienced young people make good use of the recently developed 'hubs' in Chesterfield and Ilkeston, value them highly, and speak very positively about the services on offer to support them at these centres.
42. Young people are supported to take their next steps into education, employment, or training. Persistent, respectful and creative work is enabling many young people to access education, employment and training. Care-experienced young people receive positive support from the virtual school and the co-located education advisers in the hubs, leading to purposeful work opportunities. The council actively provides apprenticeship choices for care leavers, helping them into permanent employment with the council. For some young people with complex needs who are not being engaged effectively, there is insufficient drive to help them to access education and employment opportunities.
43. Care-experienced young parents are well supported. They value the young parents' groups and the wider opportunity to share experiences with other young people in similar circumstances.
44. There is a systemically strong approach to supporting those care-experienced young people in custody. Alongside their leaving care worker, a dedicated staff member maintains frequent contact and visits them, ensuring access to financial support and encourages contact with family and friends. The innovative prison development group, with representation from probation and prison offender managers, ensures that all Derbyshire care-experienced young people in custody receive regular risk assessments which are reviewed by an effective safety panel, with well-coordinated resettlement planning to minimise the risk of future reoffending.
45. Care-experienced young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers are supported well with their accommodation, education and day-to-day living skills when they leave care. Sensitive and compassionate workers understand their

story and their journey to the UK, developing relationships with them to seek ways to understand and help respond to their trauma.

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

46. Senior leaders know themselves and their services well. Their self-evaluation is comprehensive, honest and self-challenging, and largely an accurate reflection of what inspectors found. Services continue to be reviewed and realigned promptly in response to changes in demand, for example the commissioning of an independent review of the fostering service and the subsequent actions to improve.
47. The appointment of an experienced executive director in December 2021 has brought increased focus and pace to improvement work, and a positive shift in the quality and impact of partnership working between the council and key strategic allies. This is particularly evident in the development of the partnership-wide early help strategy, which is beginning to ensure that more families receive effective help at the right time. The 'keeping babies safe' partnership strategy, built on learning from practice reviews, has led to the development of positive initiatives with health partners to ensure strong oversight of vulnerable parents during pregnancy and post-birth.
48. The commitment to corporate parenting is strong in Derbyshire. The voice and influence of children and young people are well embedded. Participation and mentoring arrangements for children are thorough and well promoted. The offer for care leavers, co-produced with young people, is comprehensive and generous across all areas of need.
49. The sufficiency strategy provides an informed analysis of the profile of children in care and clearly identifies the key themes and challenges in providing sufficient placements. Senior leaders recognise that they were initially slow to respond to the decrease in fostering households following the COVID-19 pandemic, though a recruitment campaign is now underway. The significant increase in the UAS children population has been responded to effectively, and dedicated staff support children well to settle and achieve positive outcomes. The decision to return care leaver services to the direct control of the council has led to a substantial improvement in support for these young people.
50. In response to increasing need and demand for services addressing the mental health needs of children and young people, services and bespoke interventions have been commissioned in part due to the high thresholds and long waiting lists for CAMHS provision in the county. Senior leaders continue to escalate their concerns with the integrated care board as to their need to mitigate the deficits in CAMHS provision.

51. Senior leaders and commissioning services assure themselves that the small number of older children in unregistered children's homes are safeguarded through a high level of oversight of these placements, though children's records do not routinely demonstrate this.
52. The children's services performance framework is well developed, helping leaders to identify granular issues and trends in practice and workload capacity across the county and quickly respond to emerging pressures. Quality assurance arrangements are very effective. A comprehensive, holistic learning approach to quality assurance is well embedded. Learning from practice reviews, regular reflective case reviews, thematic dip sampling and practice learning days are constructively informing training and service developments.
53. Social workers are very positive about working for Derbyshire. Senior leaders have established a positive organisational culture, evident across the whole workforce. Workers feel respected and valued by leaders. While management oversight and supervision are routinely happening, its quality in driving practice improvement and helping to embed the practice model remains variable and leaders acknowledge that this is an area for more development.
54. There is a comprehensive workforce development strategy in place. The social work academy is effective in supporting and training a large cohort of newly qualified staff. 'Grow your own' and apprenticeship options are helping to bring on more social workers from within the existing workforce. The locality-based structure is popular with the staff, who value the ability to build trusting relationships over time with children and families. There are strong and well-received internal processes for staff recognition and pay and rewards, helping to sustain staff retention.

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