

Inspection of Calderdale local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 February 2024

Lead inspector: Naintara Khosla, 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

Children in Calderdale continue to receive good services. Since the last inspection of Calderdale local authority children's services in 2018, leaders have continued to maintain and, in most areas, improve practice. Ambitious and aspirational leaders, using accurate performance management information and quality assurance processes, focus on learning and continuous improvement, so that change is secured. However, the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have meant that there are small residual pockets of practice where the change is not embedded.

Since the last inspection, leaders have acted to ensure that children are safer in Calderdale and the protection of children is now good. Children are helped from the earliest point of contact with children's services. Integrated early help services provide excellent support and children positively benefit from their intervention. Young carers have workers who help them enjoy life away from their responsibilities.

Strong senior management oversight provides children with early and consistent permanency planning, so children live in stable homes, and this is a strength. While leaders have taken action to address educational attainment, the quality and impact

of personal education plans need to improve so that children achieve their full potential.

What needs to improve?

- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- The quality and impact of personal education plans to progress children's educational attainment.

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

1. Children and families are offered support when needs or concerns are first identified, and they can access help from a range of services at the earliest opportunity through the early help advice and guidance service. Bespoke services for families mean parents can access information that increases their capacity and skills as parents, and parents can respond well to their children, including when they have additional needs. The voice of the child is embedded in early help assessments and plans and makes a difference to their experiences and progress.
2. Contacts received from multi-agency partners contain relevant information that enables workers in the multi-agency screening team (MAST) to make appropriate decisions about the level of risk or need and this informs planning for next steps. Practice managers provide guidance, and quickly ensure that social workers, supported by strong partnership arrangements, undertake prompt enquiries. Parental consent is routinely sought or overridden if this is indicated by initial risk assessment.
3. Social workers in the MAST are skilled at engaging with parents. They are professionally curious and seek to understand children's experiences and are challenging of parents if there is minimisation of concerns. Consideration of past involvement and checks with relevant partner agencies result in a rigorous analysis of the child's circumstances. Children in or outside the household are considered, and appropriate steps are taken to reduce risks.
4. Social workers in the emergency duty team respond appropriately to safeguarding issues in the evening and at weekends. However, the on-call manager does not consistently record oversight of decisions to understand the rationale for actions taken. Medium- and high-risk cases are reviewed at the daily domestic abuse risk assessment meetings. This thorough and consistent response ensures that plans are in place so that there is reduction in harm to children. Schools and health colleagues work together with social care to understand the experiences of children living in domestic abuse situations; children's needs and experiences are responded to well. Intelligent use of multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) information means that tightly

managed plans help ensure that risks to children reduce and their lives improve.

5. When appropriate, and parents acknowledge the need for help and support, referrals to the early intervention panel ensure that children and families access help at the earliest opportunity. When domestic abuse incidents are notified, and information confirms that children are not at current risk, parents are still contacted to offer advice and support to minimise potential future risk.
6. Managers' decisions to close referrals following checks are applied appropriately, and workers actively encourage parents to accept early help intervention before considering a child's record being closed.
7. When safeguarding concerns are identified, managers convene timely and well-attended strategy meetings. Multi-agency involvement informs decision-making and ensures the prompt assessment of risks for children. Children's assessment team (CAT) social workers and practice managers attend, ensuring an efficient path into assessment, and, when necessary, take immediate action to ensure that children are protected. Written safety plans are developed; however, some could be clearer to ensure that parents are aware of the expectations of them.
8. Thresholds for working with children on child protection plans are appropriate. Children's voices and experiences come through clearly in child protection conferences; social workers clearly articulate the risks and interventions undertaken to make a difference. Children are visited regularly at home and sometimes at school. Most visits to children are purposeful and well recorded. Core groups meet regularly, and these meetings are well attended by multi-agency colleagues contributing to the progress of plans. Between formal supervision, management oversight and guidance are provided to workers to progress plans, and this is recorded on children's records.
9. At review conferences, chairs hear from children and their parents, with some children attending to speak with the chair prior to the meeting starting. A small number of reviews do not reflect sufficiently on the effectiveness of the previously agreed actions. This is more evident where levels of risk remain static rather than increasing or decreasing, and can lead to drift in progress for some children.
10. Appropriate assessments are undertaken within child protection processes so that the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is only considered as a last resort. When risks increase, in most cases consideration is given to commencing the pre-proceedings processes. This allows parents to understand the seriousness of concerns and they have the opportunity to work with agencies to reduce risk.
11. When risk remains or increases, the local authority engages well with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to promote

good relationships and planning in the court arena. This prevents delay and promotes care planning within timescales that meet children's needs.

12. CAT social workers visit children and families promptly at the start of their assessment. Most assessments of children's needs are thorough, timely and informed by history, partner agency information and the voices of children and families. Analysis and next steps are well rationalised, with management decisions recorded throughout the assessment process and at completion.
13. Children and families receive excellent targeted support from the family intervention team. Families have access to a wide range of resources and services to respond to identified needs. Outcome measures are clear, and plans are effective in ensuring positive change for children. Family group conferencing is used effectively to unlock additional family support and care arrangements.
14. Disabled children living with their families have a wide range of care packages to meet assessed need. Social workers visit disabled children according to their needs and this helps build relationships. Social workers ensure that disabled children's voices are captured using a range of communication tools in line with children's assessed capabilities. Assessments of disabled children's needs are mostly comprehensive, and consider the needs of parents, brothers and sisters.
15. Support for young carers is excellent. Young carers receive a comprehensive, holistic service, following assessments that determine the impact of being a carer. Children are supported through a range of activities, groups and one-to-one sessions so that they develop insight into their home circumstances and have time away from their care tasks.
16. Effective arrangements are in place to assess children who are identified as being at potential risk of exploitation. Dedicated child exploitation social workers complete thorough risk assessments, to present at the weekly multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) panel. Contextual safeguarding information is shared at the MACE panel meetings, and this allows a review of connected relationships, builds a picture of geographical 'hot spots' linking to criminal concerns, and supports disruption activities.
17. When children are missing from home or care, prompt efforts are made to contact children on their return and complete return home interviews. Senior managers have scrutiny and oversight of the children who are most vulnerable and most frequently missing through their weekly missing-from-care meeting, which enhances the multi-agency response to missing children.
18. Responses to children aged 16 or 17 who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless do not consistently recognise their vulnerability or their home circumstances fully so that an appropriate, sensitive and child-focused intervention is provided. As a result, some children are not aware of their rights and entitlements and experience a delay in their assessment for accommodation and its provision.

19. Children at risk of coming into care benefit from the additional targeted and bespoke support service provided by the outreach team. A range of tailored direct work is carried out with children to help them to safely remain with their families where possible. Exploration of family placements helps children remain in their communities and maintain their identity. Leaders have a strong commitment to family group conferencing to assist with kinship placements and excellent post-placement support provision helps families stay together.
20. When the local authority designated officer (LADO) receives information about allegations, they respond promptly and effectively. The LADO is aware of the need for increased awareness of their role on the part of professionals and organisations that work with children and takes action to ensure that the role is promoted.
21. There is a clear process for assessing private fostering arrangements. Appropriate plans are in place for children who live in these arrangements.
22. The local authority has clear procedures to identify and monitor children who are missing education. Clear systems are in place for schools to follow when a parent decides to electively home educate their child. There is swift intervention from the elective home education team to reflect with parents on their decision and to ensure that this is right for their child.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

23. Children come into care when it is in their best interests to do so. For most children, this is planned and based on comprehensive and high-quality assessments that include a range of professionals' information.
24. Within the pre-proceedings processes, permanency planning takes place at the earliest opportunity and considers early permanency. Children's care plans continue to be scrutinised through regular permanency planning meetings. This, together with senior management oversight of permanency through the tracking panel, allows for the full range of permanency options to be considered for children.
25. Whenever possible, and when it is in their best interests, brothers and sisters remain living together. 'Together or apart' assessments inform the care plans for brothers and sisters, so that individual need and sibling relationships are considered. When necessary, children are provided with solo placements, with arrangements for family time in place.
26. Special guardianship assessments are detailed and fully consider children's needs in the short and longer term. Once special guardianship orders are granted, impressive support is on offer for families, so that children and carers continue to be supported in line with their changing needs.
27. Care plans are up to date, written in the child's voice and specific about how children's needs will be met. Timely reviews take place to monitor their journey

in care. An effective independent reviewing officer (IRO) footprint is recorded on children's records. This includes reflective discussions with social workers, midway reviews and engagement with children prior to their reviews.

28. Safe, nurturing placements meet children's needs well and help children to have stable homes with positive experiences and opportunities to achieve their potential. When children are placed out of area, it is right for them, due to the need for specialist provision or to ensure their safety. One child was living in an unregistered children's home. Leaders are progressing with the registration of a new home, reducing the use of unregistered placements.
29. Skilled and committed social workers do all they can for children in care, so that they settle and thrive in their current homes. Workers know their children very well, build strong, trusting relationships with them and ensure that they see important people in their lives. Some children return to their parents' care after careful planning and comprehensive assessments of parents' capacity to meet children's needs. Children benefit from age- and ability-appropriate direct work and life-story work, enabling them to understand their unique journeys into care.
30. Children are seen in line with changing needs and in accordance with their plans. Children are seen alone in most visits. Guidance for children who are growing up and moving into adulthood is strong, with early planning setting out young people's support needs.
31. Social workers help children to be safer and provide support around internet safety and other forms of exploitation. When children go missing from care, responses are effective. Reasons for children going missing are understood as missing coordinators are tenacious in seeking to speak to children and sharing their reports promptly with social workers. When exploitation risks are identified, risk assessments are completed and presented at the MACE panel. This informs the work with children to reduce risks and understand where they are going.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children live in homes that meet their needs. Social workers are alert to risks that unaccompanied children face and spend time providing reassurance that supports their mental well-being and helps them to keep safer. Unaccompanied children quickly have access to educational provision, and they are helped to engage in community and religious activities, such as attending places of worship.
33. Children's emotional needs are supported with therapeutic intervention and oversight provided by Calderdale Therapeutic Services (CTS). This is an effective and well-used resource within the local authority. Consultation and support for professionals are also available and valued across all services. This increases social workers' confidence as they better understand children's experiences and they can intervene with children to create stability.

34. Children's health needs are recognised by social workers and carers and their physical health, dental and optician appointments are consistently attended. This maintains children's well-being.
35. Social workers are ambitious for their children and most work closely with the virtual school in ensuring that children make some educational progress. Children are supported to access a range of social and recreational opportunities to develop their interests and skills. Children's progress is monitored through regular formal and informal discussions between social workers and the virtual school. However, not all personal education plans are high quality and are not always effective in measuring the progress children are making. This results in some children not making sufficient educational progress. There are a small number of children who are not in registered school provision. For these children, alternative educational activities are being accessed, and registered school places have been identified.
36. Calderdale has a renewed foster care recruitment offer that is successfully attracting new carers. The support to foster carers is good. Foster carers speak very positively of their fostering social workers and are supported well through regular visits, and children are seen alone. Placement stability is positive, and most children remain in their foster homes long term and are settled.
37. The fostering panel is effective and has a diverse range of members who carefully consider children's needs. There is a wide range of training provided, including bespoke training to meet individual carers' needs.
38. Calderdale is part of a regional adoption agency (RAA), One Adoption West Yorkshire. Calderdale children have their needs met through the excellent working relationship with the RAA, with Calderdale children appropriately placed with adopters. Calderdale's family finding function is proactive and birth parents are supported with counselling services. Prospective adopters report being well prepared for their adoption journey. This supports successful adoption journeys, providing stability for children.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

39. Pathway advisers (PAs), the local name for personal advisers in Calderdale, clearly know their young people well and have regular contact with them in line with their changing needs. PAs ensure that young people have their needs met, and that they are encouraged to develop their independence skills and take on adult responsibilities.
40. The PAs build trusting relationships with young people through several groups and enrichment activities, for example football and walking. This means that care leavers are involved with, and connected to, the pathways service. Young people told inspectors that they feel they are genuinely cared for by their PAs.

41. Care leavers understand how to complain if they need to. They know their rights and entitlements and are helped to obtain relevant identity documents to progress smoothly, and with a sense of autonomy, into independent living. The offer to care leavers is clear on the local authority website, accessible and up to date. Care leavers have co-produced 'the offer' and confirmed to inspectors that they influence the improvement of services for other young people. The support needs of care leavers have been recognised by the council, with 'care leaver' becoming a protected characteristic.
42. Young people are supported to develop practical independence skills commensurate with their abilities, for example skills around cooking, shopping, tenancy and financial management. Care leavers are prepared for independence well and are allocated their PA at the age of 17 and a half. A small number of care leavers expressed to inspectors that they would like more time to build their relationship with their PA. However, PAs are able to appropriately meet children's needs, provide advice and support and start building relationships with care leavers in advance of their 18th birthday. This support continues into adulthood.
43. Some care leavers remain living with foster carers in 'staying put' arrangements. Their living circumstances are regularly reviewed through pathway planning. Care leavers do not experience any pressure to move into independent living until they are ready, being very much part of their fostering families.
44. Efforts are made to support young people to live in the area they want and to feel safe. Emergency accommodation is available when needed, and improved relationships with housing allows for increasing accommodation availability and choice.
45. Most care leavers' health needs are met. They are supported to register with health professionals and helped to attend appointments. For a small number of care leavers, where there is an assessed need for mental well-being support, there is a delay in provision and some young people report feelings of loneliness. To reduce isolation, there are drop-in support sessions at the specially designated 'orange box' youth centre provision for care leavers, including, for example, access to health and benefit advice.
46. The pathways service is in touch with most care-leaving young people. PAs are accessible and support continues for as long as needed. Positively, for some young people, this has allowed support beyond the age of 25.
47. When young people need extra support, additional funding can be sought by PAs at a finance panel, so that young people are helped with, for example, debt, rent arrears and council tax.
48. Asylum-seeking young people leave care to live in supported accommodation that meets their needs. They feel secure and have a home. PAs work with the

Home Office so that immigration status can be progressed, and this allows asylum-seeking young people to settle well.

49. Young people in custody are provided with information so that they understand their entitlements and avenues of support. PAs share information with professionals, on behalf of young people, so that support is galvanised in preparation for their release.
50. Pathway plans are detailed, and sensitively written with and to young people. Discussions with young people take account of learning abilities. Pathway plans are dynamic, updated and reviewed regularly and lead to appropriate, time-bound actions. Ambitious and conscientious managers ensure appropriate oversight of the care-leaving service delivery through supervision and reflective pod discussions.
51. PAs are alert to risks young people face, including risks that come from renewed contact with family members. Young people benefit from advice and guidance when managing risks in their personal lives and in the community. When necessary, assessments are sought from adult services and appropriate referrals to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) support multi-agency risk management.
52. Most care leavers are in full-time education, employment or training, and those who are not can access support from the virtual school. PAs sensitively help young people to achieve their ambitions. When care leavers are very worried about starting courses or apprenticeships, PAs accompany them to meetings and appointments to help reduce their anxiety. Care leavers are encouraged, enabled and well supported to attend and succeed at university.

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

53. Calderdale Council, through the corporate leadership team, maintains effective oversight of children's service delivery. Regular reports on the quality of practice through case file audit, analysis of accurate performance management data and visits to frontline staff ensure that the corporate centre is aware of the context for children's services.
54. A sophisticated, intelligent system of practice learning and auditing, including feedback from children and families, informs service developments. This has developed a culture of ambition and desire to continuously do better for children, and this is tangible across all services. Granularity of exception reporting allows managers to know and understand individual children's experiences.
55. The delivery of high-quality services is enhanced by the close working relationships within multi-agency networks. Responsive services ensure that children's needs are met. The positive impact of partnership working with police

is evident in the MAST; education and health colleagues are engaged to understand their role in service provision.

56. Senior leaders are well sighted on the most vulnerable children through panel processes. There are regular and effective MACE, MARAC and MAPPA panels. This means information is translated effectively into tightly managed plans so that risks to children are reduced and their lives improve.
57. Corporate parenting has benefited from external independent scrutiny. This has led to significant and rapid inroads being made since the focused visit in 2022, to secure better engagement with children and improve care-leaving services. Children in care and care leavers directly influence council members and they promote council-wide engagement on the issues that are important to them. There is a Calderdale 'Promise' to children, which was developed with them and signed by the council leaders. Progress with corporate parenting is evident across council departments, for example in greater partnership with housing so that care leavers' needs are prioritised.
58. School places, exclusions and low attainment for some children with special educational needs and children in care are a challenge and leaders accurately assessed this as an area to improve. Insufficient progress has been made to ensure that some children reach their educational potential.
59. Senior leaders have responded effectively to placement sufficiency needs through strategic planning that has expanded the availability of homes for children. Investment in services has resulted in recruitment incentives to attract new foster carers and secured the opening of a new children's home. This means most Calderdale children can live in Calderdale.
60. Senior leaders are aware of the accommodation and housing issues for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in Calderdale. This is an area where sufficient progress has not been made. Leaders acknowledge there is further work to do, to ensure that timely joint assessments are undertaken, and children can access accommodation and be clear about their rights and entitlements.
61. Stable and committed leadership creates a safe environment for staff. Small supervision 'pods' allow time for reflection, development and learning. Social workers spoke in overwhelmingly positive terms about the supportive environment in which they work, describing Calderdale as a 'family environment', thus enabling social work practice to flourish. Workloads are monitored effectively and are maintained at manageable levels. Children benefit from social workers who have time to build trusting relationships with them. Staff talked of feeling 'safe' to practise and staff return to work in Calderdale from other local authorities. Newly qualified social workers are well supported with regular supervision and joint working. They gain confidence and experience and can continue their professional development through the wide range of training on offer, including that commissioned by the local authority through their teaching partnership.

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