

# Inspection of Cambridgeshire local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 4 to 15 March 2024

**Lead inspector:** Lisa Walsh, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

The last full inspection of children's services in Cambridgeshire, in January 2019, judged all services as requires improvement to be good. Since that inspection, there has been no overall improvement in services for vulnerable children. This inspection, however, did find evidence of concrete and significant improvement in recent months. This improvement was initiated by a new chief executive and assisted by the appropriate decision to decouple shared leadership and service arrangements from Peterborough. A new director of children's services and leadership team focused solely on Cambridgeshire have added momentum to the positive change.

Senior leaders have now made an accurate self-assessment and have created strong foundations to drive practice improvement. These improvements are being supported through a refreshed improvement board that is leading to stronger partnership working and effective mutual challenge. There has been significant political and corporate investment and commitment to the improvement of outcomes for children in Cambridgeshire. This has included the necessary financial investment to enhance capacity and quality in children's services. The 'front door' has been strengthened with a simplification of processes. The response to child exploitation is more robust, child-in-need planning is now timelier and the quality of supervision of social work

has improved. However, there is still too much variability in the quality of practice across children's services.

The workforce challenges have been significant, but there is now a relentless focus on reducing staff turnover and creating a more stable workforce. Staff morale and stability are much improved as a result of leaders making a significant culture shift in supporting staff to improve practice. A strong training offer to support social workers to develop the skills they need to provide a better service to children is now in place.

## **What needs to improve?**

- The stability and capacity of the workforce, to support manageable workloads and consistency for children.
- Placement and accommodation sufficiency for children in care and care leavers.
- The quality, consistency and timeliness of assessments.
- Achieving permanence for all children in care and, in particular, strengthening the support for special guardianship orders.
- Transition planning for care leavers.
- The responsiveness of out-of-hours support.
- The consistency of support for 16- and 17-year-old children presenting as homeless.

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

1. Not all children who need help and protection receive a good service. Some children's experiences are impacted by the inconsistent practice of out-of-hours services and the quality of assessments and plans. A small number of children are left in neglectful situations for too long and are not escalated quickly enough into pre-proceedings. Alongside this, children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless are not consistently informed of their rights and entitlements.
2. Children have access to a wide range of timely and effective early help services, supporting them to receive help that is proportionate to their needs. There is a clear interface between early help and the front door. Families' cases are stepped up or stepped down to statutory services appropriately and, as a result, children receive the right support at the right time.
3. Most children receive an effective response from the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) when there are concerns about their safety and welfare. Timely information-gathering and analysis, supported by clear management direction, ensure that children at risk of harm are protected. A very small minority of children who are not deemed to be at risk of significant harm experience delay in having their needs assessed.

4. There is a consistent and appropriate response to gaining parental consent. Checks with partner agencies are proportionate and relevant to the level of risk to children. Social workers in the MASH consider family history well to help inform decision-making. Thresholds are applied well and effective conversations between professionals ensure that appropriate information about children's needs is shared.
5. The capacity of the out-of-hours service to respond to children's presenting needs is too limited. This means that children and families are not always receiving timely social care support and there is an overreliance on partner agencies. Prior to this inspection, leaders recognised shortfalls in practice and responded by increasing capacity through taking on additional staff.
6. Strategy meetings for most children are timely and well attended and lead to effective multi-agency planning. For a small number of children, visits take place without the benefit of full information and a coordinated response from professionals. As a result, the level of risk for these children is not fully understood at the earliest opportunity.
7. Most children benefit from timely assessments. Information from partner agencies and family history is routinely collated. Social workers consistently speak with children to gather their wishes and feelings and engage well with families. However, some assessments are too adult-focused and the impact of family history on current circumstances for children is not always well understood. Where assessments are stronger, they provide a clear rationale for actions to support the improvement of children's experiences.
8. The quality of planning and plans for children is variable. Most plans are detailed, with actions to reduce risks enabling children to continue to live safely within their family networks. However, a minority of children's plans are too vague, without clear detail regarding contingencies should children's circumstances deteriorate.
9. Social workers know their children well and develop strong relationships with them. Children are regularly seen, in line with presenting needs, and visits are responsive to changes in circumstances. Some children have had too many changes in social worker, which has led to children experiencing delay and repeated child protection planning.
10. Many children and families benefit from a strong and impactful multi-agency response when domestic abuse is a feature in their lives. This is supporting sustainable progress for children to be safer.
11. Child protection core groups and child-in-need review meetings are convened regularly. These forums helpfully update parents and professionals on key

developments and assess the continuing effectiveness of plans in addressing unmet needs and reducing risks to children.

12. Children continue to receive support after stepping down from child protection plans, remaining open under a child-in-need plan. This enables families to receive ongoing help, focusing on achieving sustainable progress for children.
13. Disabled children receive effective services from a workforce that is sensitive and understanding of their additional needs.
14. When children's circumstances do not improve, there is mostly timely and appropriate initiation of pre-proceedings through the Public Law Outline (PLO). Inspectors identified a very small number of children for whom this action should have been swifter, to prevent them remaining in neglectful situations for too long. Most letters before proceedings are clear and identify key issues well.
15. There is robust oversight of children who are in private fostering arrangements. Children are seen and spoken to alone. Assessments are detailed and show strong evaluation of carers' capacity to meet children's needs.
16. When children are at risk of exploitation, the response is prompt, well coordinated and effective. Assessments are thorough, timely and holistic, and consider any strengths and concerns. The progress and impact of plans are regularly reviewed, and this targeted support is reducing risks to children. Arrangements for talking to children who go missing from home or care are thorough. Workers are skilled in being able to engage children when they have been missing and to gather information and use this to inform effective safety planning.
17. The response to children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless is inconsistent. Despite clear protocols, children's needs are not always fully understood. Joint assessments between children's social care and housing are not consistently taking place, and for some children this means that they are not clearly informed of their right to enter care. In addition, children are not currently offered the help of an independent advocate to help them make informed choices.
18. Social workers reported that they felt very well supported and described managers as approachable and knowledgeable. Social workers receive regular supervision, which is recorded on children's files. For most children, there is effective management oversight of work with them to ensure that their identified needs are met to support the progression of their plans in a timely way. The recording of supervision is variable in quality, with actions not always having clear timescales.
19. The response to allegations of harm made against professionals is robust. The local authority designated officer service is highly effective, with systems and

processes that are efficient and provide a swift and appropriate response to safeguard children.

20. Senior leaders have developed one team to have oversight of children who are missing from education or electively home educated. This team has established effective approaches to safeguard children. They also engage families in preventative work and act as mediators with schools to resolve disputes. This approach effectively supports vulnerable pupils to remain in school or to return to school as quickly as possible.

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

21. Children come into care when necessary. For most, this happens in a planned and timely way. When children need immediate protection, social workers respond effectively through the use of emergency orders. However, some children who have been subject to long-term neglect experience delay in being safeguarded by not coming into care early enough.
22. Most children live in good and stable homes where they are cared for and about. Many children flourish in the care of foster carers, who are well trained and supported.
23. The effective work of the Reunification and Placement Stability Service is enabling some children who are on the edge of care to safely remain living at home. The service has also helped children to safely and successfully return home. This supports children to maintain their identity and sense of belonging with their birth family.
24. For children who are unable to safely remain with their birth family, appropriate opportunities for kinship care are explored at an early stage. As a result, some children can move to live with people they already know and trust, rather than experiencing the stress of moving to live with people they do not know.
25. When children cannot be safely cared for by their parents or wider family and friends, for most children, the full range of permanence options is considered. For children with a plan of adoption, timely consideration of early permanence is firmly embedded in practice. The local authority works effectively with the regional adoption agency (Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Adoption) to ensure that the right adopters are recruited for Cambridgeshire's children. The local authority's strong links with the regional adoption agency support children to benefit from carefully considered matching and introductions, providing them with the best opportunity for permanence.
26. Due to social workers' capacity, some children in care wait too long to receive their life-story books. As a result, children are not always helped to understand their identity and early childhood experiences.

27. Some children experience delay in planning for them when their plan is not one of adoption. These children wait too long for stability in their long-term living arrangements because of delays in being formally matched to long-term foster carers. Not all children who could be are benefiting from the stability offered by a special guardianship order (SGO). SGOs are not consistently promoted, and carers are often not clear about their support entitlements. Senior leaders recognise this and the SGO offer is currently under review.
28. Sound assessments support decisions to enable children in care to return home under placement with parent regulations. However, some of these children have been living in these arrangements for too long, meaning that they have been living with statutory intervention and a level of uncertainty for longer than necessary.
29. Some children in care have had consistent social workers who visit them regularly and have developed strong relationships with them. However, some children have experienced changes of social workers, and this has affected their ability to form comfortable and trusting relationships.
30. Some children in care do not have an up-to-date assessment of their needs. This impacts on the quality and timeliness of planning in relation to permanence. This means that some children experience delay in securing permanence at the earliest opportunity.
31. Skilled social workers in the disability service have a good understanding of the needs of disabled children in care. Transition planning for disabled children is timely and effective, supporting them into adulthood.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a prompt and tailored response. These children are provided with appropriate accommodation, along with practical and emotional support.
33. Social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) work collaboratively to support most children to attend their looked after reviews, enabling them to fully participate and have their voices heard. Reviews are held regularly, and minutes are sensitively written to children, outlining their strengths and achievements as well as their support needs. IROs actively monitor children's welfare in between reviews and when appropriate escalate any areas of concern effectively.
34. Social workers recognise the importance of supporting children to live with their brothers and sisters when possible. Children also benefit from spending time with those people who are important to them, in line with their wishes and feelings and a sound analysis of risk. Children are supported to participate in a wide range of leisure and social activities. As a result, they have fun, make friends and develop a sense of identity and self-worth.

35. Increasing numbers of children who come into care have a timely initial health assessment. Review health assessments, regular dental checks, the increasing use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires and in-house clinicians are helping children in care to maintain good physical and mental health.
36. Most children in care attend school and are making progress. The virtual school, supported by a knowledgeable management board, fosters strong working relationships with schools and multi-academy trusts. They have committed to ensuring that every child has access to a quality education. This collaborative approach has supported a decrease in the numbers of children in care being excluded from school.
37. A lack of sufficiency contributes to placement instability for some children. These children are sometimes inappropriately matched with carers who cannot meet their specific needs. Some children have experienced multiple moves in a short period of time, affecting their ability to form stable relationships with carers. There is strong senior management oversight and increased visiting for the small number of children who live in unregistered children's homes. For those children who live in supported accommodation, senior leaders have been proactive in supporting these services to make the required applications to Ofsted.
38. The fostering service has experienced some uncertainty and change in the last year, due in part to the separation from Peterborough and the changes in the leadership of the service. Stability of leadership is now more evident, and staff and carers are more positive and happier to embrace the new service direction. Service plans are focused effectively on core areas for development. They include an achievable target for increasing the numbers of foster carers and strengthening the support structures for children and carers to prevent placement breakdown.
39. Members of the Children in Care Council (CiCC) are well supported by participation officers. Children engage in a limited range of participation activities and share their views with the corporate parenting subcommittee. Senior leaders are aware the CiCC is underdeveloped, with only seven regular members. This limits children's capacity to influence service development in Cambridgeshire. The voices of children are being given high priority through the refreshed improvement plan to support meaningful engagement with children at a corporate level.

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

40. Although some children in care are well supported with their transition to leaving care, some do not have the benefit of developing a relationship with their personal adviser (PA) early enough.
41. Most PAs have a detailed knowledge of care leavers' needs and histories. There are strong, supportive and respectful relationships between care leavers and their workers. Most PAs visit care leavers regularly, which supports them to have a good understanding of changing needs and risks. However, some PAs' caseloads are too high, which for some impacts their ability to fully respond to the needs of care leavers.
42. Most pathway plans are timely and are supported by an assessment reflective of current circumstances. However, the quality and depth of some plans is too variable. Weaker plans do not routinely identify risks or include input from partners.
43. Most PAs promote the importance of education or employment effectively with care leavers, with additional support provided by careers advisers and a range of external agencies. Most care leavers are in employment or receiving education or training which reflects their interests, and this encourages their development. An increasing number of care leavers benefit from both practical and financial support while studying in higher education. This is helping them to achieve their aspirations and to move into their chosen careers. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to support care leavers with ring-fenced apprenticeships. A working group is currently exploring how this can be developed, with consultation with care leavers.
44. Most care leavers live in accommodation which meets their needs. However, sufficiency challenges mean that for some there is a lack of choice of accommodation. When appropriate, care leavers can remain with foster carers in formal 'staying put' arrangements. However, due to a lack of suitable accommodation, a small number of care leavers have been placed in temporary and unsuitable accommodation for too long. As a result of this inspection, senior leaders have strengthened risk management processes to support a more coordinated response for these care leavers.
45. Most care leavers are able to access appropriate services to meet their physical and emotional health needs. Care leavers can access support for their mental health through in-house clinical and commissioned services. However, not all young people have access to their health histories. This means that some young people do not have access to health information that is important for them.
46. The local offer for care leavers is limited. Care leavers told inspectors that the offer and entitlements are not consistently well understood. The local authority



has recognised this as an area for development and has secured investment to enhance its local offer to care leavers. Senior leaders are also reviewing how to improve care leavers' awareness of the local offer.

47. Being a care leaver has recently become a protected characteristic within the council. This shows corporate commitment, but it is too early to see its impact. Care leavers are provided with the documents they need as they move into adulthood. This includes having one form of identity documentation, such as a passport or provisional driving licence.
48. The majority of care leavers understand how to make a complaint and some care leavers access independent advocacy to support them to have their voices heard. The local authority takes complaints seriously, responding appropriately and taking the right action to improve services.
49. A commitment to care leavers who live outside Cambridgeshire ensures that they have access to services and support comparable to those living in the local authority area, meaning that they are not disadvantaged by geography.
50. Care leavers who were previously unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are thoughtfully supported by their PAs to access local amenities, taking account of their individual cultural and identity needs.
51. PAs work effectively with care leavers who are parents, ensuring that they access the right levels of support. For those who are in custody, there is effective support, visiting, oversight and planning for when they are released.
52. When care leavers reach the age of 21, they have their right to ongoing support clearly explained to them, but after this too much onus is on them to contact the service should they want support. The local authority was aware of this prior to this inspection and has begun to review these processes.

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

53. Since the last inspection, in January 2019, Cambridgeshire children's services has gone through significant changes, most notably the decoupling from the shared leadership and service arrangements with Peterborough City Council. This decoupling has enabled the recruitment and introduction of a new Cambridgeshire senior leadership team within Children, Education and Families. In February 2022, a new chief executive was appointed, followed by a new executive director (DCS) in June 2023. A permanent leadership team is now in place, providing fresh leadership and vision.
54. The new leadership team faced significant challenges in managing the separation of services and partnership arrangements while at the same time driving improvement in services. They correctly identified that some services

had stagnated or declined since the last inspection. Leaders have undertaken improvement work with vigour and a clear vision. As a result, workers describe a palpable improvement in working culture and morale and the support provided for children and young people has begun to improve across all services. This improvement has been backed by strong political support and significant new investment. This has included much-needed investment in the front door and assessment teams and in care leaver services.

55. The chief executive and elected members have high aspirations for children, understanding the requirements for significant improvements in children's services and its place in the wider partnership.
56. A refreshed Children's Improvement Board has an independent chair and an experienced Department for Education commissioner to support the improvement work of children's services. This has provided a greater level of scrutiny and challenge, leading to a clear strategic plan for delivering consistently better services for children. Senior leaders welcome scrutiny and challenge from external partners. Leaders reflect on current service delivery and make improvements to frontline practice. Children's services have continued to benefit from a sector-led improvement partnership which has completed a whole-system diagnostic assessment across children's social care. These findings have informed the action plan to improve practice and outcomes for children.
57. Following decoupling, leaders have reset partnership relationships effectively and established clear lines of accountability between children's social care, police, education, health partners and adult services. Inspectors have seen the benefits of these collaborative relationships for the experiences of children, with the co-location of partners in the front door and for disabled children.
58. Historically, the oversight from the corporate parenting board has not been sufficient to ensure that its work is consistently impacting on improving services for children in care and care leavers. Senior leaders recognise this, and improvement plans are now in place to support a more collaborative approach with children for future service delivery.
59. Senior managers understand the ongoing challenges regarding sufficiency of placements for children and care leavers. The current sufficiency plan is under review and is being enhanced in response to identified need. Leaders correctly recognise the need to prioritise the recruitment of foster carers and the commissioning of additional accommodation in order to better meet children's needs. They also recognise the relationship with partners in housing requires development to ensure that care leavers have consistent access to appropriate accommodation.
60. On the whole, self-evaluation demonstrates that senior managers know the service well, recognising the inconsistencies in practice across children's services. During this inspection, when shortfalls were identified by inspectors,

leaders were able to demonstrate that they were already beginning to take assertive action.

61. The quality assurance framework has been revised. This now includes a more effective plan to provide senior leaders with a line of sight to the quality of services. Quality assurance processes are providing leaders with an accurate picture of the quality of work undertaken with children. However, audits are not consistently carried out collaboratively with social workers and families or always used to improve work with the children whose cases have been audited.
62. Effective performance reporting is in place to ensure that the senior leadership team and all managers have a clear understanding of performance, trends and quality of practice.
63. Some social workers' caseloads remain too high and, as a result, practice for children remains inconsistent. This has contributed to a high turnover of staff and an overreliance on agency workers. This means that too many children continue to experience changes in social workers, impacting on their experiences.
64. Senior leaders recognise the impact of the capacity and demands on the workforce. Staff have experienced instability in both leadership and clarity of vision. In response to this, a workforce development board has been established with a focus on recruitment and retention of staff. Additional social work posts have been created to increase capacity. Targeted recruitment taking on overseas social workers and the use of social work apprenticeships are some of the initiatives being pursued.
65. Staff are overwhelmingly complimentary about the new leadership style and appreciate leaders' visibility. This is supporting a new culture of learning, care and honesty. Staff are energised through the support they receive. The care academy is now providing them with clearer career pathways.
66. Staff are benefiting from a comprehensive training programme which supports their continuous professional development. This means that workers develop confidence and skills to support children more effectively.
67. The DCS and the committed leadership team have an unrelenting focus on improving experiences for children. They have provided clarity on the expectations for all staff, and leaders are developing a culture that promotes good practice. However, the pace of change now needs to accelerate in all areas of the service to provide safe and consistently good outcomes for children.

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