

Inspection of Oldham local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 24 May 2024

Lead inspector: Rebekah Tucker, 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 in March 2019, when services for children and families were judged to be requires improvement to be good, there has been a relentless focus on improvement, driven by the director of children's services and his strong and stable leadership team. The pace of change has been purposeful and has ensured that children now benefit from good-quality help and support. Most children's outcomes improve as a result of family-focused, child-centred practice, which is increasingly aligned to a new model of practice.

Political and corporate commitment have translated into significant financial investment to strengthen services and provide increased workforce stability. The areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection, and in the subsequent focused visit in 2021, have largely been addressed. For example, there has been significant progress in the quality of assessments, children's plans and the work of the children with disabilities team. The support provided by the complex safeguarding team continues to be strong. Leaders have sustained a good level of service in early help and at the 'front door', despite increased levels of demand. Care leavers receive a good level of targeted support.

Senior leaders know that there is still further improvement required in some specific areas of practice and they are well sighted on these issues. There are now robust mechanisms in place to ensure that rigorous management oversight further strengthens practice for children.

What needs to improve?

- Consistent management oversight in relation to supervision and audit actions.
- The quality of return home interviews for children, to ensure that impact and outcomes can be appropriately measured.
- Undertaking life-story work for children in long-term foster care.

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

1. Children and families in Oldham benefit from a comprehensive range of early help services. Children who are referred to early help services, or stepped down from the assessment and intervention teams, receive targeted and timely support. Early help officers, based in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), successfully support partners to use the family help tool in response to identified needs. This leads to child-focused early help assessments, which bring about effective and positive change for children as families are well supported. Seven family hubs have opened in the last year, supporting expanded delivery of early help to families in their communities. Early help workers undertake creative direct work with children, which is used purposefully to inform children's plans.
2. Contacts and referrals into the MASH are dealt with in a timely way and are prioritised in line with risk and need. Experienced and knowledgeable practitioners in the MASH undertake thorough screening, where family history is carefully evaluated alongside the views of parents and children. Parental consent is routinely considered and only overridden when appropriate. Thresholds are mostly understood and appropriately applied so that the majority of children receive the right level of support and intervention. However, demand is high due to some inappropriate contacts into the MASH. Leaders have been proactive in addressing this with the wider partnership.
3. The response to domestic abuse referrals is well embedded in the MASH. Contacts are managed sensitively to mitigate risk to victims, using the support of the independent domestic violence adviser for adults and children. Social workers obtain information from key agencies, which leads to clear analysis of risk to inform the immediate and ongoing safety planning for most children.
4. The initial response to children at risk of significant harm is prompt. Children are transferred immediately to the assessment and intervention service. Strategy meetings are timely and are attended by relevant partners. Consideration of history, alongside the presenting issues, helps social workers

to determine a clear threshold for action. Multi-agency decisions made at strategy discussions are sufficiently detailed and appropriately focused on children's safety.

5. Section 47 child protection enquiries build on the information shared in strategy meetings. Social workers visit children, see them alone and gather their views using direct work to inform next steps. Initial child protection thresholds are appropriate and conferences are convened without delay.
6. The out-of-hours service (EDT) responds appropriately to urgent issues. Social workers visit families when required and ensure that protective arrangements are in place for children until the next working day. Communication between the social workers in EDT and daytime services ensures seamless support to children and families. The quality of EDT screening is mostly robust and there are positive relationships with police and health services.
7. Children's assessments are thorough, detail their lived experience and provide an understanding of need and risk to inform subsequent planning. Some assessments benefit from the use of research and direct work to understand the impact of cumulative harm on children's lives. There is sensitivity to the analysis of the cultural and religious needs of children and families. Support and intervention take place during the assessment, which means that families do not wait for the help that they need.
8. Children in need benefit from plans that are written in language that is easy to understand and plans make clear what needs to change and why. This means that children and families understand why social workers are involved in their lives and what is expected of them. Children are not subjected to unnecessary statutory processes, as thresholds of need are well understood. Most plans are carefully considered and take account of children's needs well. Review meetings are well attended and information is shared to measure progress and to agree next steps. When children are subject to child-in-need plans, effective management oversight, with timely checkpoints, reduces drift and delay.
9. Children who are subject to child protection planning receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response. Most plans are thorough and focused and reflect up-to-date assessment, adapting to changes in need and risk. Plans are monitored through timebound actions and they are reviewed in regular, well-attended multi-agency core group meetings. When neglect is the prevailing risk factor, there is timely and responsive social work practice. For a small number of children, including those who experience domestic abuse, plans do not contain sufficiently specific targets.
10. Social workers visit children regularly and get to know them well. Children receive a sensitive approach from their social workers, which enables social workers to develop positive relationships with them. Children's voices are captured well, and for some children creative direct work clearly informs subsequent planning.

11. A small number of children remain on child protection plans for longer than they need to be, although there is now more effective management oversight of these children through regular panels and senior management scrutiny. The number of children subject to repeat plans has reduced and decisions to end child protection plans are appropriate.
12. When risks to children increase, there is timely escalation into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, supported by a clear rationale. Letters before proceedings are of consistent quality and they are very clear about what the concerns are and what needs to change. Careful monitoring of children subject to pre-proceedings ensures that children are successfully diverted, or proceedings are issued, preventing any drift and delay. As a result, children's experiences and outcomes improve. This area of practice has been significantly strengthened since the last inspection.
13. Flexible and effective edge of care support is provided by the specialist adolescent support unit (ASU). ASU staff are committed, enthusiastic and passionate about making a difference for children. Relationships between parents and children significantly improve as a direct consequence of ASU intervention. The ASU has successfully supported many children to remain at home, through a combination of outreach support and short breaks.
14. Children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation are recognised and responded to well. For these children, the multidisciplinary child exploitation team is a valuable resource. Creative and persistent work is undertaken by committed staff to engage highly vulnerable children. The missing coordinator completes trigger plans which have been successfully used to locate children missing from home or care. Return home interviews are offered to all children who have been reported missing, but they do not consistently capture the push-and-pull factors to reduce future risk. Senior leaders were aware of this prior to the inspection and are taking active steps to drive improvement.
15. Disabled children benefit from consistent relationships with skilled social workers, who know them well and advocate strongly on their behalf. Children have effective support and safety plans, informed by a multidisciplinary team and timely review. Children are visited in line with their assessed needs. Social workers have a focus on supporting children to remain in the care of their families. Services for disabled children have significantly improved since the last inspection.
16. When 16- and 17-year-olds present as homeless, they receive a well-coordinated response from housing and children's services. Children are either supported to remain with their families, when it is safe to do so, or informed of routes into housing or care in accordance with their assessed needs.
17. Social work assessments of children in private fostering arrangements are mostly thorough and timely. Children are well supported by social workers, who ensure that their health, education and emotional needs are met.

18. There is limited oversight of the delivery of services, support and provision for young carers, and as a result, the impact of this on the lives of children is not well understood. Senior leaders took immediate remedial action during the inspection to address this.
19. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service provides a thorough response when there are allegations made against adults working with children. Allegations against professionals are swiftly and robustly managed.
20. There are robust systems in place to locate and monitor children who are missing education or who are electively home educated. Staff are tenacious in identifying suitable placements for those children who are missing education. Through their annual visits to children, appropriate support is secured for children whose parents choose to educate them at home.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

21. Decisions to bring children into care are appropriate and are made in their best interests, with effective decision-making and scrutiny by senior managers. Consideration is given before children's removal about whether they can remain living in their family network. Most children are placed in settled and stable living arrangements, where their carers understand and meet their needs well. When children come into care, they live with their brothers and sisters whenever possible, and there is due consideration in care planning of family time and the continuity of sibling relationships. Most children who are placed outside of Oldham live in safe and stable homes that meet their needs well and they make good progress.
22. Care planning is timely, informed by children's voices, and up-to-date assessments. Most children's identity and cultural needs are well considered. Children's plans are regularly reviewed at meetings, which are well attended by parents and professionals. Care planning is a strengthened area of practice since the last inspection.
23. Permanence is considered early for children. Legal orders are sought promptly, to reduce the risk of drift and delay for children, with active consideration of special guardianship, kinship and foster to adopt placements. There is strong partnership working with the family courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to achieve positive outcomes for children.
24. For a small number of children, arrangements for progressing permanence in long-term foster care are not as effective. This creates delay in providing them with a sense of belonging and stability. Senior leaders have galvanised their oversight and decision-making in this area in recent months. Long-term fostering matches and special guardianship are now considered at regular panels and there has been an increase in the discharge of care orders for children placed at home with their parents.

25. Children are encouraged and supported to participate in their reviews as much as possible, with some co-chairing their meetings. Most children have the opportunity to meet with their independent reviewing officer (IRO) before their meeting. The IRO ensures that children are fully included and have a clear understanding of their plan. IROs appropriately and effectively escalate their concerns about the progress of children's plans, and their involvement is clear in children's records.
26. Most children benefit from meaningful relationships with their social workers, who have taken time to get to know them well. Visits to children in care are purposeful and child-focused direct work is undertaken. Some children have experienced several changes of social worker. This means that not all children in care have the quality of relationship with their social worker that they need. This affects the quality and frequency of direct work, including life-story work.
27. Senior leaders promote the participation of cared for children and actively seek their voice in developing and shaping service delivery. Children took delight in sharing their experiences of being involved in a commercial production, shown in a local cinema, about the life of cared for children.
28. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive in Oldham are well supported. Experienced and tenacious social workers ensure that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have their cultural, linguistic and religious needs well met.
29. The local authority makes stringent efforts to avoid the use of unregistered children's homes, with a very small number of children living in unregistered children's homes due to sufficiency challenges. Appropriate action is taken to identify suitable registered provision in a timely way.
30. Children receive proportionate responses to reduce risk and keep them safe. When children go missing, return home interviews are completed promptly by a commissioned service. The quality of these interviews, and their impact on reducing episodes of children going missing is, however, inconsistent. Leaders are aware of this and are taking appropriate steps to improve practice and outcomes for children.
31. Children in care have their ongoing health needs well met, although there are some delays in completing their initial health assessment. A partnership workshop, led by senior leaders, has resulted in a joint agency action plan, with timely actions to address delays. The plan is under way and includes the provision of staff training, increased management oversight and system changes to reduce delay.
32. The virtual school encourages collaborative and strong relationships with education partners. The needs of children in care are clearly understood. The education of children in care is well supported by aspirational personal education plans which support children and measure progress. Children are

encouraged to pursue their interests and hobbies. This helps to raise their self-esteem, provides them with a sense of achievement and enables them to have fun and socialise.

33. Foster carers benefit from regular support and specialist training. The local authority has recently launched its first foster carer hub support and respite initiative, giving children stability with their foster carers. Senior leaders have ambitious plans to launch a further five support models over the next three years. The fostering panel provides sufficient scrutiny of practice and clear, well-considered recommendations are made to the agency decision-maker.
34. The local authority is a member of a regional adoption agency (RAA), Adoption Now. Strong and effective links between the local authority and the RAA mean that the recruitment of adopters is appropriately targeted to the specific needs of children. The successful use of fostering for adoption placements minimises moves for children, enabling the development of early attachments. For most children, later-in-life letters and life-story books show strong, compassionate practice and are written sensitively, supporting children to understand why they did not grow up with their birth family.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

35. Most children benefit from effective transitions between the children in care team and the care leavers service. Personal advisers (PAs) are allocated to most children sufficiently early to support effective relationship-building. PAs work with children alongside social workers before young people transition to the leaving care service at 18 years. For most, this co-working arrangement is effective, supporting them to build meaningful relationships as they move into adulthood. However, a small number of children do not meet their PA early enough, meaning that these relationships are not established in a timely way.
36. PAs develop trusting relationships with care leavers. Care leavers told inspectors that levels of support are 'pitched perfectly' to support young people to become self-sufficient, while also enabling the PAs to be there for them when they need them most. PAs ensure that they regularly keep in touch with care leavers, with increased visiting when necessary. PAs recognise the significance of relationships with family, carers and friends and actively support care leavers to maintain these important links.
37. Care leavers access mental health support through universal pathways. Although for a small number this creates challenges in accessing support at the right time, PAs encourage care leavers to access a range of online resources to promote well-being. Care leavers have access to their full health histories via the looked after nurse, which enables them to understand their health and development.
38. Care leavers have pathway plans that accurately reflect their needs. Most plans are effective, co-produced and are regularly reviewed. As a result of effective

planning, most care leavers are supported to make progress in many areas of their lives. Plans show that care leavers are informed of their rights and entitlements.

39. When care leavers are at risk of exploitation, the response from PAs is very effective. Many care leavers benefit from purposeful work with the complex safeguarding team, which takes account of risk and vulnerability. Referrals to adult services are made at the right time and team around the adult meetings are held to identify support needs promptly. PAs are curious in their approach to managing risk, using multi-agency information in their analysis.
40. Care leavers who are parents receive a supportive service from their PAs. PAs are responsive to care leavers, both practically and emotionally. PAs are also involved in multi-agency planning in respect of young people's children.
41. Care leavers aged over 21 are actively consulted to establish if they wish to receive ongoing help and support. There is a clear policy of young people having to opt out of the 21-plus service, with annual contact being made to establish and review levels of support. PAs are keen to maintain contact with young people for as long as possible in recognition of individual need and vulnerability. The written quality of pathway plans for these care leavers is variable, with some plans not being reviewed and updated regularly enough.
42. For most care leavers in custody, PAs keep in touch regularly. Effective partnership working with the probation service ensures that temporary housing options are available for care leavers on release from custody.
43. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive a high level of support, including practical and emotional well-being support. PAs place an emphasis on education, with most young people attending college. PAs are curious and alert to the young people's vulnerability and have a clear understanding of the impact of early childhood experiences and trauma and use this to inform plans. Care leavers benefit from having access to local amenities in line with their cultural and identity needs.
44. PAs and managers place a positive emphasis on employment, education and training. PAs support care leavers to achieve their academic or personal aspirations. The university offer is strong, with financial support to ensure care leavers can focus on their studies. When care leavers are not engaged in education, employment or training, they benefit from tailored support. Opportunities for employment or apprenticeships with the local authority or local businesses are not yet well established. Leaders responded swiftly to this issue during inspection, ring-fencing a number of apprenticeships for care leavers, with a bespoke support and remuneration package.
45. Care leavers said that they are living in accommodation that is safe, in areas close to family or social networks, where this is appropriate. When housing issues arise, PAs are usually successful in supporting young people to maintain

their tenancies or in helping them move into more appropriate accommodation. Care leavers are supported to remain with foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements, if this is assessed as meeting their needs.

46. The co-produced local offer for care leavers is comprehensive. The core of the local offer means that young people receive council tax exemption up to the age of 25 if they live in Oldham. They also receive the appropriate setting-up home grant and matched funding for driving lessons. The offer is published and is consistently accessible for care leavers through a web-based app.
47. Most children leave care with bank accounts and the appropriate documentation that they need so they can establish themselves independently. Care leavers are supported to access funding for help with the essential things which they may need in life, including removal expenses and the setting-up home allowance.
48. The council has made leaving care a protected characteristic. For some care leavers, this has had an immediate and positive impact on their lives, supporting them to obtain and sustain tenancies, often in times of personal difficulty. There is an unfaltering council duty to care leavers and a clear understanding of corporate parenting responsibilities.
49. Care leavers are encouraged to provide their views on service delivery and value opportunities to celebrate their achievements through a number of forums. The corporate parenting panel is increasingly seeking the views of care leavers to influence planning and service developments.

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

50. Since the last inspection in March 2019, there has been a relentless focus on improvement by a strong and stable leadership team, with progress made across many areas of practice. Leaders have an accurate understanding of their key strategic priorities, which are clearly outlined in their self-evaluation. Despite increased demand, workforce instability and placement sufficiency challenges, there has been unwavering strategic intent to improve outcomes for children, which has been overseen by an independently chaired improvement board.
51. The implementation of the 'Getting to Good' programme has created a framework for senior leaders to target practice improvement in 12-week cycles across the workforce, involving managers and practitioners. The focus has been on improving the quality of plans, assessments, chronologies and visits. This has had a tangible impact on the quality of social work practice and the experiences and progress of children in Oldham.
52. This focused programme of practice improvement is underpinned by strong corporate and political support, which is reflected in the significant investment

in children's services since 2022. Oldham Council has a strong sense of its corporate parenting duties for children in care and care leavers. During the inspection, senior leaders responded immediately to feedback from care leavers regarding the provision of gym passes. They have also acknowledged there is more work to do to ring-fence internal apprenticeships for care leavers and have viable plans in place to progress this.

53. There has largely been progress in the areas identified as requiring improvement at the previous inspection and visits. The quality of assessments, risk analysis and plans for children have improved. Disabled children now have effective assessments of their needs that lead to well-coordinated planning. Pathway plans are mostly timely, leading to the provision of a consistently good level of support for care leavers.
54. Senior leaders know there is more to do and they are continually striving to establish and deliver greater consistency in practice, and to achieve improved workforce stability.
55. Improved professional relationships across the partnership enable leaders to set high expectations and standards of themselves and their staff. There are clear lines of accountability and there is a culture of being able to safely challenge partner agencies. Positive feedback from Cafcass and the family judiciary highlights that senior leaders work successfully with their partners.
56. Senior leaders have detailed and relevant knowledge of local communities and this has been used in shaping services to better meet the needs of children and families. Local support to families has been strengthened through the development of family hubs, ensuring that children and families are supported at the earliest opportunity.
57. For children in care, sufficiency remains a key priority for leaders, with targets set to increase the number of mainstream and kinship foster carers, expand the number of foster carer support initiatives and increase the in-house residential provision.
58. While improvements in audit practice have been seen, there is more to do to ensure 'closing the loop' audit activity is consistently having an impact on the experiences and progress of children. Senior leaders were aware of this prior to the inspection and have made changes to the quality assurance framework to ensure a strengthened line of sight to practice.
59. Leaders have developed a suite of effective performance management tools that provide information and analysis that supports the management of services to children. For example, there are appropriate and robust arrangements to track permanence and children on child protection plans.
60. Workers are positive about their experience of supervision, although there is some variability in its quality and impact for children. Senior leaders have

invested in tailored training for managers, to enable them to support social workers to drive forward plans for children and achieve better outcomes.

61. Leaders have acknowledged that workforce stability continues to be one of their key priorities. Expansion of the workforce by 55 social worker posts has reduced social worker caseloads. Although most staff considered workloads manageable, caseloads are still too high in some teams. Leaders have an ambitious plan in place to maintain the reduction of agency staff numbers. Agency workers continue to convert to permanent roles in Oldham and there is evidence that they are staying for longer. The local authority's 'grow our own' model supports the increase in permanent roles.
62. There are a wide range of support and training opportunities available to staff in Oldham. Staff, including agency workers, have access to relevant training to assist them in their work. Workers across all areas of the service are positive about working for Oldham. They describe being well supported by visible, available and approachable managers.

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