

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Tanya Miles
Executive Director of People
Shropshire County Council
Shirehall
Abbey Foregate
Shrewsbury
SY2 6LY

Dear Ms Miles

Focused visit to Shropshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Shropshire children's services on 30 and 31 July 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were John Roughton and Nick Bennison.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The sufficiency of local placement options and the partnership response to the emotional health needs of children in care were areas for improvement at the last judgement inspection in February 2022.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, which included speaking with social workers, managers and senior leaders. They also looked at children's case files and the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

Headline findings

Senior leaders have maintained a strong focus on service improvement for children and families in this area of practice since the last inspection. In particular, leadership capacity has been enhanced, with an additional assistant director post established, responsible for refreshed early help and edge of care services, adoption, fostering and newly developed bespoke in-house residential homes. More children are being returned closer to home, through increased fostering and residential capacity.

Effective partnership working has helped to develop new services to address the emotional health needs of children in care, and to support foster carers to manage children with complex needs.

Investment in frontline staff has led to the creation of an additional social work team, reducing caseloads for social workers so they have more time to spend with children in care, to build important relationships with them and ensure their plans are addressed.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The effectiveness of management and independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight in the progression of children's plans.
- The pace of discharging care orders for children where they are successfully reunified with their parents or secured with extended family members.
- The engagement of children in developing corporate parenting plans and priorities.

Main findings

Most children live in stable and caring homes which meet their needs. They are well supported by carers who know and understand them. Children who live out of area receive the same level of support and frequency of visiting as those children who live in county.

When children come into care, options for them to remain with their family are explored, so that when they cannot return to their parents' care they are placed within their extended family if possible. The Stepping Stones service, embedded since the last inspection and incorporating family group conferencing arrangements, is helping to support children to remain at or return home and, if it is not safe for children to do so, to identify and support kinship carers.

Most children in care benefit from strong and trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well and understand their needs. Purposeful direct work is undertaken by social workers. This work incorporates the child's likes, interests and worries, ensuring it is individual to them. Life-story work is creative and tailored to children's needs and abilities, considered and progressed for most children in care. Children with complex needs are supported by experienced social workers and skilled carers who understand their unique needs and disabilities well.

Most children's plans are detailed and up to date, although not routinely written and circulated in a timely way. Plans are thorough and reflect a child's specific and holistic needs, vulnerabilities, wishes and aspirations. Actions have a clear focus on achieving the right kind of permanence for each child according to their assessed needs.

For some children who are settled and living in their long-term placements, there is a delay in formal matching or establishing special guardianship arrangements, or discharging orders when children are safely living with their parents on care orders.

Leaders are aware of this and some progress is now being made, but many children are waiting too long for statutory intervention to end.

Despite investment in the IRO service, with caseloads now reducing, visits to children before meetings are not always taking place. In addition, the IRO oversight of children's progress against their plan is not routinely recorded. Reviews are mostly timely and well attended. Stronger examples of review records are written to children, clearly explaining their circumstances and plans. Much greater consistency is needed in IROs playing an active role, ensuring that children's needs and plans are being progressed and, if they are not, that they are escalated effectively.

Children are supported to address their physical health needs, with referrals to specialist services when needed. Most children benefit from annual health and dental assessments. Since the last inspection, strengthened partnerships have led to significant investment in emotional health services for children in care and their carers, which has led to reduced waiting times for the assessment and provision of therapeutic services appropriate to children's needs.

Most children are making positive progress at school. There are strong links between schools, the virtual school and social workers to ensure that schools have the right information and support to meet the child's educational needs. Personal education plans are routinely reviewed, and the child's voice, wishes and ambitions are central to informing these plans. The virtual school has been successful in ensuring that no child in care has been excluded since the last inspection.

Children are actively encouraged to pursue their hobbies and interests and are supported practically and financially to achieve their potential. They are involved in a wide range of activities that widen their interests and friendship groups and support their self-confidence. Carers work hard to ensure that children maintain links with their current and past friendship groups.

There are very few children in unlawful short-term unregistered placements. However, for those in such placements, there is strong oversight by leaders, regular visiting to ensure children are appropriately safeguarded and effective monitoring arrangements in place supported by clear protocols, while appropriate registered provision is secured.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in Shropshire are well supported by committed social workers who are sensitive to their cultural needs and experiences. Social workers strive to culturally match children with carers and provide access to appropriate resources in their communities. Social workers show a good awareness of the risks arising from the journey that unaccompanied children and young people have made, with sensitive and considered direct work undertaken with them and referrals on for therapeutic support as needed.

Children are supported to participate and engage in a range of opportunities to help improve services and support. The Corporate Parenting Board is well attended by elected members, key partners and senior leaders, and while the voices of children inform the board, more needs to be done to ensure that young people are actively involved and engaged in attending and influencing the corporate parenting agenda.

The ambitious senior leadership team has been further strengthened with the appointment of a second assistant director and additional capacity across the workforce. This has provided greater capacity in service development and quality assurance to ensure that children in care are thriving and making good progress. Leaders receive strong political and corporate support from a committed chief executive and lead member. Both are well informed about children's services, which enables greater scrutiny and challenge to leaders. While sufficiency challenges continue, in particular in the recruitment of foster carers, the development of in-house residential provision and the input of Stepping Stones has enabled more children with complex needs to return to live closer to home.

Leaders have an established quality assurance framework which recognises the importance of audits, practice weeks and workshops to raise standards of practice and outcomes for children. While this has been further strengthened since the last focused visit, audits are not consistently completed collaboratively with social workers and feedback from children and families is not routinely obtained. Leaders have invited external scrutiny and are continuing to develop the quality assurance framework.

Social workers said they enjoy working for Shropshire and feel well supported. They said their workloads are busy but manageable. Workers describe a positive working environment, with visible and supportive leaders and managers who are genuinely interested in the progress of their children.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

John Roughton
His Majesty's Inspector