

Staffordshire County Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 4 February 2019 to 8 February 2019

Lead inspector: Alison Smale
Her 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	Requires improvement
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children's services in Staffordshire are good. Leaders and managers have made impressive progress since a focused visit in 2018 which highlighted a deterioration in the quality of some services. As a result, the local authority took concerted action to improve services and ensure that vulnerable children are considered as a corporate priority. The budget for children's services is now protected, and additional funding to restructure and increase the number of social workers has been provided.

Leaders and managers' prompt and effective action has resulted in reduced caseloads for social workers. Social workers have more time to consider and complete work which leads to improved outcomes for many children. Most children and families in Staffordshire receive a good service and benefit from good-quality social work practice. Skilled practitioners work with children and families to reduce risks, meet needs and achieve positive change.

The local authority recognises that social work practice in a small number of teams and for some groups of children is not consistently good. This includes care leavers with whom the local authority is not in touch, children at risk from gangs and criminal exploitation, young people who are homeless and children who are electively home educated. The local authority is working to address the needs of these young people, but the pace of change has been slow.

What needs to improve

- The length of time a very small cohort of children remain subject to a child protection plan is too long, without sufficient change in their circumstances, and they remain in neglectful circumstances.
- The local authority's response to children exposed to contextualised risk is not well developed and joined up. For a small number of young people who are at high risk, the response is not robust enough.
- The effectiveness of return home interviews for children who repeatedly go missing from home or care.
- The effectiveness of the response to young people who present as homeless.
- The rise in electively home educated pupils has been significant and there is very limited challenge or safeguarding checks for those families who choose this route for their children.
- The effectiveness of the response to care leavers who the local authority is not in touch with.

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

1. The first response service provides effective and timely screening when children are referred. Needs are identified promptly, and the right action is taken to ensure that families receive the services they need. Consent from families is obtained appropriately. Thresholds are well understood among partners, but the quality of referrals received from other agencies varies, meaning that the needs of children are not always initially understood, and further information is often required. Partners within the first response multi-agency safeguarding hub work well together to ensure shared analysis and timely decision-making for child protection enquires.
2. The first response service promptly triages all domestic abuse incidents. Children, as victims, are prioritised, which means that children's social care focuses clearly on the associated risks. Decision-making considers both current and historical risk, vulnerability and coercive control. Lower-risk families are referred to community hubs, ensuring that these children and families receive early help from a range of local services. Children whose needs present outside of office hours benefit from an effective emergency duty service.
3. When new concerns present, children and families experience child protection enquiries that are thorough and lead to timely action. Strategy discussions in the first response service are prompt, with good information-sharing, informed by wide-ranging checks across agencies, including adult services. Social workers and managers are confident to challenge professionals to ensure that the right decisions are made for children. In open cases, agencies other than the police and children's social care are not routinely involved in strategy meetings when concerns escalate. This means that decisions are made without full information or challenge.
4. Local support teams offer a highly effective range of targeted programmes and outstanding support to children and families through locality-based teams, which have a significant and positive impact. Children and families benefit from an experienced workforce with a range of skills and tools which support and deliver positive outcomes. The service is well managed, with clear systems and good co-working with children's social care. This ensures effective transition and continuity for families. The service uses effective measures to evidence impact and positive change for children and families.
5. Once referrals are passed through to the safeguarding units, they are assessed and acted on promptly by dedicated duty hubs. Referrals are given the necessary priority. This new approach results in stronger initial work and assessments of families that form a firm basis for future work by the safeguarding teams.

6. The majority of assessments completed in safeguarding teams are strong. Social workers proactively involve males who are in the home or in a relationship with parents. Parenting assessments are used well to assess parenting capacity. The partnership pathway for unborn children is effective, ensuring good oversight, support and risk identification for vulnerable babies. This means that families receive timely support. Where risks to children's safety and well-being are too high for children to remain with their parents, decisions to protect them are made without delay.
7. Most plans are of good quality, with some assessments and plans being of excellent quality. Core groups and child in need meetings, involving partners, are well embedded and effective. Agreements with parents are used to good effect, with clear expectations set out and understood. Safety planning is evident on many files, with appropriate use of family meetings, and inter-agency planning to reduce risk. The quality of assessments and plans is not consistent across the service. A small number of teams complete less strong plans, based on poorer assessments that do not identify and address needs sufficiently well. In these teams, a very small cohort of children remain on a child protection plan for too long. These children experience long-standing neglect without sufficient change in their circumstances.
8. Where child protection plans have not reduced risk, there are clear decisions to progress matters to legal gateway meetings, and, if appropriate, into the public law outline. The pre-proceedings aspect of the public law outline is used effectively. Legal gateway meetings, based on good assessments, ensure thorough decision-making and timely progress to permanence. Family meetings are used effectively, and at an early stage, to fully explore the potential for wider family networks to become engaged in supporting children to achieve good outcomes.
9. Children are seen regularly and seen alone by their social workers. Many children, young people and families benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. The quality of direct work with children varies between teams, and this means that the understanding of children's lived experience varies depending on which team a child's social worker is in.
10. A range of services are provided to families to effect change, including successful use of the edge of care and intensive prevention service. Following a reorganisation and return of the disabled children's service to the management of children's social care, disabled children benefit from an improved disability service. This ensures that they are safeguarded and that they receive the right help to meet their complex needs.
11. The local authority's response to children exposed to contextualised risk is not sufficiently developed. For a small number of young people at high risk, the response is not sufficiently effective.

12. The local authority has been successful at developing a stronger response for children at risk of or exposed to child sexual exploitation. Many cases evidence good identification of risk. Where risks are clear, they are well managed, and children receive the right services, which reduces risks. Due to difficulties in using the electronic recording system, social workers have difficulty in finding previously completed child sexual exploitation records. This means that where there are low level indicators or historic vulnerabilities, these are not sufficiently risk assessed or understood.
13. When children go missing from home or care, return home interviews are not always effective in identifying or reducing risks. Children are offered interviews, but some do not undergo these due to a lack of tenacity and persistence in order to ensure children are seen. Return home interviews do not evidence how information about wider risks to children are shared in order to reduce risk. For those children who go missing frequently, plans are not sufficiently clear to reduce the risk of harm.
14. The local authority now recognises that it needs to do more to meet the needs of young people who present as homeless. Young people do not receive a prompt assessment or understand their right to become looked after. Consequently, their needs are not fully identified or met.
15. Effective partnership working with colleagues from Staffordshire police ensures that the response to children being placed in custody is improving. As a result, the number of children remaining in custody overnight has reduced.
16. The local authority has not responded quickly enough to the rise in electively home educated pupils. There is very limited challenge or checking of the vulnerability of those children educated at home. Multi-agency groups regularly and effectively review the educational needs, placements and attendance of children who have been, or who are at risk of, permanent exclusion. The local authority is taking an increasingly robust approach towards schools that are slow to admit children in crisis. Officers are tenacious in their tracking of the whereabouts of children who go missing from education to ensure their safety and to ensure that they continue education.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is good

17. Children and young people come into care in a timely manner and when it is in their best interests. Thresholds for coming into care are appropriate, based on clear assessments and decision-making. The creation of court teams is a strength in progressing care proceedings and preventing delay for children.

Social work evidence and early planning promote a range of permanence options, including kinship care. Due consideration is given to placing brothers and sisters together, and, contact arrangements for children are thoroughly and effectively considered. Placement with parents arrangements are well-thought-through and supported. Children benefit from life-story work in order to understand their backgrounds as well as why decisions have been made for their long-term future.

18. Social workers know the children they work with well and this is reflected in their recording. Children are seen regularly and alone by their social worker, and their views inform decision-making. Children benefit from regular consideration and use of advocacy and independent visitors. Regular review of care plans by independent reviewing officers ensures that they understand the wishes and feelings of children and progress plans.
19. Children in care and care leavers are in good physical and mental health. Their health needs are identified and met, and children's enjoyment is encouraged through activities and holidays. Children in care make good progress in education over time. Personal education plans (PEPs) are improving, but checking and monitoring systems are not yet fully embedded.
20. Placement stability is a strength. There are strong systems to support stability and prevent breakdown, for example edge of care and the intensive prevention service. When children are placed out of area, they are appropriately placed in settings which enable their outcomes to improve. Such children have access to education and therapeutic support and are enabled to maintain contact with important people in their life. Social workers visit regularly and maintain meaningful relationships with these children. Thoughtful planning takes place to return children to their home area when possible.
21. A dedicated team for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength and ensures that their needs are met. On arrival, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are swiftly risk assessed, registered with a doctor, and placed in appropriate education settings, with creative use of pupil premium funds to support language development.
22. Children participate in local forums held across the county to share their views and influence service development. These help the children build up their confidence to engage in the main children in care council. However, despite these initiatives, attendance levels in the children in care council are low. A specialist group for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is well attended and gives them a good opportunity to engage.
23. The recruitment and assessment of foster carers is effective. Although recruitment remains a challenge, the local authority targets recruitment well. As a result, the numbers of newly approved foster carers are increasing.

Foster carer assessments are thorough and are conducted in a timely manner. Careful consideration and support is given to children remaining with family or friends. The fostering panel is effective in making robust recommendations.

24. Foster carers feel well supported by their social workers and receive help and advice from mentors and a range of support groups. There is a wide range of pre- and post-approval training available to foster carers to enable them to meet the needs of children placed with them. Supervising social workers are creative in the way they support and encourage foster carers to attend training and develop learning. For example, they offer bespoke training to foster carers on an individual basis in their own homes.
25. There is active recruitment of adopters. The agency is just short of their target of 50 approved adopters for this year. Assessments of prospective adopters are analytical, thorough and conducted in a timely way. The panel executes its functions well and provides good scrutiny of applicants' motives to adopt. Panel members receive training to enable them to fulfil their roles effectively. There is a good two-way process of feedback for panel members and social workers, which is successfully improving the quality of assessments.
26. Children benefit from systems which identify children at an early stage for adoption. Introductions are well managed, with input from both the child and adoption social workers. Adopters are positive about their experience of pre- and post-approval training. Fostering for adoption is fully promoted and explored in assessments.
27. The agency provides a flexible range of tailored adoption support, with good focus on therapeutic support. Adoptive families are well informed at an early stage and are clear about their entitlement to adoption support. Adoption support plans are clear, and adopters describe a good quality of social work support.
28. Care leavers value the through-care system and the consistency it offers, particularly at the time of transition from children's to adult services. Most care leavers are seen regularly. Personal advisers advocate for young people to achieve the right services. Care leavers spoken with were positive about the help they receive. The local authority recognises that pathway plans need to improve as they are not consistently ambitious enough for all care leavers.
29. The local authority accepts that the quality and consistency of the care leaver service has been impacted by staffing and sickness. Due to staffing issues in the team, personal advisers do not work closely with young people until they are 18 years old, and there are a small number of young people without a dedicated worker. This means that there is insufficient oversight for some of these young people, and it is more difficult for these vulnerable young people

to maintain contact should they need help as these relationships are not established.

30. There is limited support to help vulnerable care leavers access education, employment and training opportunities. There are only limited programmes to help build care leavers' confidence and independence skills. The local authority acknowledges that there is a shortage of supported accommodation for over-18-year-olds. The local authority is starting to work to address the lack of tolerance by some housing services of young people who struggle initially at independence.

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

31. The director of children's services, who is also a deputy chief executive, and her management team have ensured that children's services is a corporate priority. Lines of reporting and accountability within the local authority have been strengthened. The local authority has refreshed its commitment to protecting and resourcing children's services with investment and plans that, in the last year, have been implemented to improve services. Consequently, the budget for children's services has been protected and additional funding has been provided to restructure and to increase the number of social workers.
32. The local authority has an effective culture of learning. The local authority has a comprehensive approach to gaining and learning from feedback from young people, complaints and serious case reviews, which has led to a range of communication and training with staff and informed policies to improve practice. The local authority has responded effectively to issues identified in this inspection, and, has responded quickly to areas for improvement and addressed deficiencies in individual cases. For example, it is taking urgent action to review its policy on young homeless people. The local authority's self-evaluation of practice is broadly accurate and the children's services leadership team knows its services well. Since the focused visit last year, leaders and managers have achieved impressive progress and improvements. For example, reduced caseloads have enabled social workers to spend more time with children and families, and the service for disabled children has been improved. The local authority recognises that more needs to be done and is addressing those areas of service which still require improvement.
33. A developing sense of corporate responsibility for children in care and care leavers means that, increasingly, the whole local authority recognises and prioritises the needs of vulnerable children. There is a shared corporate ownership for outcomes.

34. Mature partnerships such as the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Staffordshire Families Strategic Partnership help the local authority to respond to emerging needs. The local authority's transformation agenda is responsive to changing demand and is benefiting children and families, for example by commissioning and developing in-house services to meet a range of needs, such as the domestic abuse service, which is now providing a more equitable service across the county. New approaches, such as the court and local support team re-structure, are piloted and tested to provide a firm service base before being rolled out across the county.
35. The local authority uses performance information and quality assurance well in order to scrutinise and improve practice. Management oversight of practice, including practice scrutiny by senior managers, has resulted in improved quality of supervision, management decisions and the quality of assessments and plans. The local authority accepts that performance in a small number of teams has not been addressed promptly enough. The local authority is aware that quality and accuracy of some performance information is made more difficult by challenges with its electronic recording system and is acting to address this.
36. Staff are positive about working in Staffordshire. They have access to a comprehensive range of training, which is leading to a skilled workforce. Effective systems are in place to ensure careful monitoring of workloads. The leadership team has been effective in reducing workloads and social workers now have sufficient time to see children on a more regular basis. Staff report being able to plan work more effectively and feel more assured that the children they work with are safe. Staff are very positive about their experiences of working for Staffordshire during a time of considerable structural change. Staff describe good access to confident and supportive managers and a calm, consistent strategic approach to service development and provision. Staff are being attracted to work in Staffordshire and the local authority is increasingly effective at recruiting staff to permanent positions.



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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

© Crown copyright 2019