

Inspection of Shropshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 February 2022

Lead inspector: John Roughton, 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 to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in Shropshire are benefiting from the high aspirations of senior leaders for their services to continue to improve children's lives. Since the last inspection, leaders have improved performance and concentrated on getting their preferred practice model and effective processes in place to support managers and social workers to improve experiences for children.

Leaders in Shropshire know themselves well. They are making good use of data and management information and learning from quality assurance to inform service planning and developments within the local authority and across the partnership. However, despite this, there are some areas where progress in responding to or resolving known issues has not been quick enough, for example, the application of the Public Law Outline (PLO) and the domestic abuse triage arrangements.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children's services have continued to provide a high level of support for all children, including ongoing face-to-face visits to promote their safety and well-being. Where partners were otherwise deployed, the local authority stepped up to ensure that children's needs and risks were responded to. Care leavers in particular have benefited greatly from the enhanced support of their personal advisers.

What needs to improve?

- The effective application of the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO, and the local arrangements for the family group conference service.
- The sufficiency of local placement options.
- The partnership response to the emotional health needs of children in care.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection are identified quickly at the single 'front door' (Compass). There is a proportionate response to contacts and referrals. Prompt decision-making is informed through agency checks, consideration of history and discussions with parents. Thresholds between early help and social care are well understood by all the agencies and are appropriately applied, which ensures children get the right help at the right time to meet their needs. Greater consistency needs to be applied to the gathering and recording of ethnicity data to ensure a full understanding of children's potential needs.
2. There has been disruption to the established partnership between children's social care and the police in making triage decisions about domestic abuse. In recent months, the police have withdrawn from these arrangements and have been making these decisions unilaterally, only referring the high-level risk concerns to children's social care. This means that information is not always recorded about the impact of domestic abuse incidents on children, either current or historic, to inform safe and effective decision-making now or in the future. It is of concern that this issue has only been resolved during the inspection.
3. In the majority of cases, decisions to hold strategy meetings are made appropriately. These meetings take place promptly and are well attended by partners, informing clear plans. Health colleague attendance had been identified as inconsistent and funding has now been agreed for two dedicated health workers to join Compass.
4. Single and joint investigations are necessary and proportionate. These are well recorded, with clear rationale for decision-making and evidence of management oversight, confirming appropriate next steps to support and protect children.
5. Children benefit from effective multi-agency working to identify those who are vulnerable to exploitation or are being exploited. Child exploitation triage meetings are in place to review intelligence from the police and exploitation risk assessments, and make decisions which lead to strategy discussions, advice and information or ongoing work and review. The impact of these processes is helping professionals to be informed about risks to individual children, to map activity and networks and undertake disruption and preventative work with children and families to prevent escalation.
6. When children go missing from home, return home interviews (RHIs) are conducted appropriately and effectively by workers from the child exploitation

team. This ensures exploitation risks for these children are identified as soon as possible. Effective collaboration and timely information-sharing are helping to protect vulnerable adolescents, through early interventions or disruption activity. Risks from exploitation that continue to adulthood are now being considered through a pilot project with the adult safeguarding board, so that young people are treated as victims and appropriate support and diversion are provided.

7. Out-of-hours services work effectively with partner agencies to ensure children are protected. Joint visits are completed with police in a timely way and children are seen alone to understand their views. Out-of-hours workers have access to most of the appropriate services they require. Leaders have recently reviewed the current model for out-of-hours provision and identified areas for improvement and enhanced technology to support practice, with new arrangements planned from April 2022.
8. Comprehensive assessments accurately reflect children's and families' experiences. Social workers engage effectively with children and families, using the local authority's preferred model of practice to identify strengths and risks, and are sensitive to individual's identities. Assessments in the disabled children's team are very thorough and provide a detailed understanding of the children's health needs and level of functioning. Parenting capacity, external support, views of parents and the views and observations of children are explored well, leading to appropriate decision-making.
9. Children who present as homeless are well supported. They are appropriately assessed and are offered the right help to remain living at home or are accommodated in suitable alternative placements, including section 20 accommodation where appropriate. Children are made aware of their rights and entitlements and receive the right level of help to promote their welfare.
10. Children in need benefit from well-coordinated and effective partnership working in response to their identified needs. Social workers build positive relationships with children and families, making use of a range of tools and techniques to ensure children's wishes are understood and inform planning. Child in need plans are reviewed regularly and effectively, and are outcome-focused and mainly timebound.
11. Child protection work is demonstrating that children are benefiting from child protection plans which are focused effectively to bring about positive change. Core groups are held regularly, and the plans are used effectively to monitor progress. Plans are, for the most part, realistic and outcome-focused, which means that children and their families are being helped to make progress and reduce risk.
12. Visits to children on plans are child-focused and purposeful. They address relevant issues, celebrate success and make observations of parent and child interactions, as well as gathering children's views.
13. There are delays in establishing family group conferences to explore extended family and community resources. This does not support finding the best

solutions for children to remain living with their families and increases the risk of children needing to come into care.

14. Children are not benefiting from the effective application of the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO and, as a result, some children at risk of harm experience delay in securing safe, permanent care. These children have been exposed to neglect or even injury as a result of a lack of authoritative practice and professional curiosity regarding their circumstances. Decisions to consider PLO are being made too late, letters before proceedings are of poor quality and PLO plans are not consistently reviewed or progressed. Letters before proceedings are overly complicated and do not make it clear to parents what they need to do to ensure that their children remain in their care. During this inspection, senior leaders have acknowledged these issues and produced a comprehensive action plan in response.
15. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service in Shropshire responds promptly and robustly to concerns about adults in a position of trust who present risks to children. The LADO service is working effectively with the police and other partners. It coordinates the work of agencies and reviews progress in investigations, ensuring that all actions are concluded so that children are safeguarded. The LADO service is proactive in ensuring its role is understood and are involved in training newly recruited social workers and in running safer recruitment training for partners across Shropshire.
16. Effective tracking systems allow leaders to have oversight of those children who are missing education and those who are home educated. These systems lead to escalation to the education welfare service when elective home education is not in children's best interests in terms of promoting their welfare, or when children are missing. This service works closely with parents and children to ensure that children's welfare is promoted.

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

17. Children do well once they come into care. They are making progress and are provided with support to develop their hobbies and interests. Issues of children's culture and identity are carefully considered and appropriate support provided to meet these needs. When children in care are at risk of exploitation, careful consideration is given to where they live and how they can be safeguarded.
18. Children in care are visited regularly and according to their need. Social workers know children very well and many of them have long and well-established relationships with the children, which enable them to better understand their needs. Social workers undertake direct work with children to build relationships, explore feelings and gather their views effectively.
19. Some children have experienced significant issues with their mental and emotional well-being through the pandemic. Their needs in relation to this are not consistently well met by appropriate health provision. The local authority is

mitigating the impact of this through spot purchasing of tailored support to meet individual children's needs and through its own provision. Leaders are working persistently with the clinical commissioning group and health providers to commission services to address this gap.

20. Children's care plans are detailed and specifically focused, with timescales for monitoring progress or completion. Health assessments are routinely taking place and health needs are captured and addressed in children's plans. Plans are helping children to make positive progress in response to their identified needs.
21. There has been a recent dip in RHIs taking place following incidents of children going missing. This hinders a full understanding of risks and the development of strategies to prevent further exposure to harm. Leaders have close scrutiny of this issue and are responding, ensuring that RHIs are routinely prioritised and undertaken and help to support children's safety, through careful analysis of the factors leading to their going missing.
22. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) know children well and maintain contact between reviews. In most cases, IROs are having a positive impact on progressing and escalating concerns, to make a difference for children.
23. New initiatives to address sufficiency issues in Shropshire are being implemented and developed, particularly for those children with complex needs. Significant investment in increasing capacity in residential and semi-independent provision is starting to provide more options for children in care and those approaching adulthood to live more locally, nearer to universal services and family support.
24. Children are benefiting from the effective coordination of permanence arrangements, with more children secured in long-term fostering arrangements and planned moves back into area from out-of-county residential placements.
25. There are increasing numbers of children benefiting from special guardianship orders (SGOs). Viability and connected carer assessments are timely, ensuring there is no delay for children. The provision of pre-SGO advice is clear and this helps inform carers' decision-making. As a result, SGO plans are tailored to meet the needs of individual children and their permanence is being secured in their extended family networks where possible.
26. Children live with foster carers who are well trained and are skilled in meeting their individual needs. The preparation, training and assessment of prospective foster carers enables them to have an understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering task. There is a clear framework of training for all foster carers. A mainstream foster carer recruitment strategy is in place, however, managers are not on target to meet this year's recruitment goal.
27. Children are benefiting from permanence through adoption and there has been an increase in the number of foster to adopt approvals and older children and sibling groups being matched with adopters. Adopters are positive about the support provided throughout the adoption process. Careful planning ensures

that children's moves are completed sensitively and enables adopters to build meaningful connections with their children.

28. The virtual school and partners work well together to ensure that children in care receive the educational support they need to succeed. Individual children are making strong academic progress. Older children are being helped and supported into higher education, training and employment opportunities, including the council's own apprenticeship scheme, as appropriate to their needs.
29. Children leaving care in Shropshire receive excellent help and guidance from enthusiastic and passionate personal advisers (PAs), who are tenacious in supporting young people to make positive changes to help them to progress in their lives. Pathway plans are collaborative and dynamic, prioritising the areas of work which are the most important to children and young people. They show how risk and behaviours are challenged and support young people to think about what needs to be done to make further progress.
30. The local offer for care leavers is comprehensive and effective. It includes support with housing, finances, the development of a new care leavers hub and dedicated careers advice. Despite the pandemic, there has been substantial improvement in the numbers of 17- and 18-year-olds in employment, education or training and an improving picture for those aged 19 to 21. Apprenticeships offered by the local authority are paid at a rate which supports young people to be able to live independently.
31. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors unanimously agreed that PAs in Shropshire provide them with exceptional support, tailored to their individual needs. The PAs have been working with their young people for many years and it is this level of consistency and reliability that the care leavers value highly.

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

32. The lead member, chief executive and director of people have made a significant change to the culture of the organisation, with a shift towards people-focused priorities and a clear emphasis on improving outcomes for the most vulnerable members of society. Political leaders are bringing children to the front and center of the council's business. Representation on the corporate parenting board reflects a whole-council commitment to championing children in care and care leavers.
33. Elected members and senior leaders recognise that early help provision has been cut back too far in the recent past, which in part may be reflected in the increased numbers of children coming into care. There is a renewed commitment to investing in preventative services, for example, the 'stepping-stones' service, with a focus on earlier intervention and edge of care support already having a positive impact on supporting children and families. Increased investment in the fostering service is enabling more children to be appropriately cared for under special guardianship arrangements.

34. Partnership arrangements, in particular with health organisations, are focused on the benefits to vulnerable children of early prevention. Leaders are working closely with the clinical commissioning group and health providers to ensure that children with complex emotional needs have access to responsive services within timescales to make a positive difference.
35. Despite frequent communication with police partners, the local authority had not been able to influence a speedy and positive outcome to the lengthy absence of a joint domestic abuse triage arrangement. While this has been reinstated during this inspection, continued work with police partners is needed towards the earlier resolution of such issues as they emerge.
36. Performance data is largely accurate and used effectively by leaders and managers throughout the organisation. Regular performance and quality assurance reports and meetings focus not only on compliance but also on what the findings indicate about the experience of the children, informing audit priorities and practice improvement.
37. Quality assurance arrangements are strong, with a comprehensive approach to learning from audit. There is effective learning from thematic audits. Good communication and training with workers to share learning is helping to improve practice, for example, in testing threshold decision-making in section 47 inquiries.
38. While children's voices routinely inform their own plans, the participation of children in influencing strategic planning is not as sufficiently developed as that which leaders aspire to. In response, a project is starting which will involve children in its steering group and have children's representation at the corporate parenting board, with children actively informing future strategic plans. A care-experienced care ambassador is now employed, supporting children to attend the Care Leavers Forum and working with elected members to raise awareness in the local economy. This is leading to increased work experience opportunities for children in care and care leavers.
39. There is a comprehensive workforce development strategy, helping to build a staff group working to the local authority's practice priorities. Increased numbers of practice educators are being trained to take on more students, newly qualified workers, 'Step-up' students and trainee social workers. Leaders are aware of the need to recruit more experienced social workers due to the current imbalance in the workforce and have invested in a targeted recruitment campaign starting in March 2022.
40. Social workers in Shropshire are benefiting from an organisational culture in which they feel valued and supported, and benefit from a wide range of learning and development opportunities available to them.
41. While social workers report receiving good and regular supervision, this is not reflected in the recording. This means that children may not understand the monitoring of progress against their plans and the rationale for decisions affecting them when they choose to access their records later in life. Leaders have commissioned a comprehensive training programme to support managers

and workers in their recording of supervisions. This had been paused during the pandemic but is now due to restart in the spring of 2022.

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