

Worcestershire

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 17 June 2019 to 28 June 2019

Lead inspector: Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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 and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Progress has been made in many areas of children's services in Worcestershire since the last inspection, when the local authority was judged to be inadequate in all key areas of practice in 2016. Effective work by senior management and staff, together with commitment and investment by political leaders, has led to improved responses to the needs of children and families. As a result, outcomes for many children and their families are better, and there is evidence of a sustained trajectory of improvement.

A strengthened front door multi-agency response (MASH) and improved children in need and child protection practice identify risk of harm and, in most cases, ensure timely and effective interventions. The local authority understands the risks of exploitation better and has ensured that practice in this area has improved. The need for permanent arrangements for children in care has been re-focused and permanent alternative families are now being found quickly for many children. Those children who have a plan for adoption are supported by an effective adoption service. Young people leaving care benefit from more effective

pathway planning and dedicated personal assistants. Senior leaders have successfully created a more stable and permanent workforce and are ensuring that caseloads for social workers are reducing.

Despite a focus by the local authority on the importance and need for partnership working, the early help partnership remains insufficiently robust. This means that the local authority struggles to ensure that its early help services are received by families on a timely basis. There continues to be drift and delay in progressing plans for a small number of children in care and in achieving stability and permanence for them as quickly as possible. Most young people in care enjoy stable placements, but, for a small number, there remains considerable placement turmoil and reduced options for overall good outcomes as a result. Senior leaders have not been able to ensure that all young people leaving care live in suitable and long-term accommodation. A small number of young people aged over 18 are living in bed and breakfast accommodation, and some who are sofa surfing are considered homeless. Clear access to dedicated mental health services have not been secured for children in care and those leaving care.

What needs to improve

- The engagement with partners to deliver early help to families and to ensure that this help is timely.
- The quality of intervention with families where there is a risk that children may be received into care if the right support and guidance is not available.
- Assessments of need for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, including whether they should come into the care of the local authority. Young people should be told clearly about this option.
- The timely availability of family support when children have a plan to leave care and return home.
- Learning from the breakdown of placements for children by the holding of timely disruption meetings.
- The availability of a dedicated pathway to the provision of mental health services for children in care.
- The provision of personal assistants for care leavers when they reach the age of 17.
- The availability of suitable accommodation and timely interventions that ensure that care leavers, including those aged over 18 years, are not placed in bed and breakfast accommodation or become homeless.

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

1. The local authority is the major provider of early help services delivered by targeted support teams across the county. Other agencies take responsibility for undertaking early help assessments in only a small minority of cases. Managers promptly review and make appropriate decisions in respect of early help requests. Despite this, too many children wait over eight weeks before being provided with an allocated worker who can assess their needs and provide early help. Although managers monitor and prioritise children on the waiting list, ensuring that those with higher-level needs receive help more quickly, waiting times prevent children from receiving early help at the right time. Once they are allocated a support worker, the work undertaken with some children and families is making a positive difference to their lives.
2. Most families who have more complex needs receive timely responses from the MASH. Thresholds are applied appropriately in most instances and most children and families receive a proportionate response according to need. The need for

consent is understood and sought or dispensed with appropriately. For those families needing help at weekends and overnight, the emergency duty team provides effective responses that are recorded well.

3. Decision-making is usually prompt. In a minority of cases, decisions are made without the full triangulation of all information available. This is a vulnerability for the local authority, and, in a small number of cases, has led to significant information being missed. Weekly MASH meetings held to discuss cases with significant histories of previous involvement, including neglect, are not always effective. In a small minority of cases, a lack of analysis of risk has resulted in missed opportunities to carry out strategy meetings and child protection enquiries, although no children were seen to have experienced harm as a result.
4. Daily triage meetings about domestic abuse are effective and enable multi-agency discussions to take place to plan actions to safeguard children where domestic abuse is a feature in their lives.
5. When serious safeguarding concerns are identified, timely strategy meetings, which are well attended by partner agencies, make informed decisions regarding next steps. Actions agreed at the end of strategy meetings are appropriate. They include timescales for further actions and make provision for interim safety plans to be agreed where necessary.
6. Assessments of need are completed in a timely way. Most consider family history, the views of partner agencies involved with the family and the views of children, and they analyse risk effectively. As a result, recommendations for further action are focused on needs. In some cases, chronologies were either overly long or not up to date, thus restricting their use in workers being able to see the child's whole story. Assessments are regularly updated prior to child protection and child in need reviews, which ensures that the most relevant and up-to-date information is considered in those reviews.
7. Social workers know the children they work with well. They spend time with them alone to ascertain their views and use a range of age-appropriate tools to help develop an understanding of what life is like for children. As a result, children's views are informing assessment outcomes and plans.
8. Child protection conferences and children in need meetings (CIN), together with core groups, are timely and generally well attended by partner agencies, parents and young people. Scaling tools are used in these meetings and enable the measurement of progress to demonstrate whether and how children's circumstances are improving. When child protection concerns reduce, cases appropriately 'step down' to CIN, enabling families to maintain the progress they have made. Where concerns increase, swift action is taken to escalate them, and appropriate child protection enquiries are undertaken to safeguard children. Although many young people attend or contribute to child protection

conferences and children in need meetings, not enough children are offered or have the benefit of the support of an advocate.

9. Child in need and child protection plans that derive from assessments are variable in quality. Better plans include clear actions, with timescales, and demonstrate a focus on what needs to change. Others do not address all concerns identified in the assessments, and do not include specific timescales for actions that hold each person involved to account or facilitate the measurement of progress being made. Some include over-complicated language which makes it difficult for parents to understand what they need to do and by when to improve their children's lives.
10. The use of a strengths-based system of assessing risk is now embedded and used effectively to help professionals and families discuss risk to children and measure progress in reducing that risk.
11. When safeguarding concerns either continue or escalate, legal advice is usually sought promptly to consider whether pre-proceedings should be initiated. In some cases, good use is made of time-limited pre-proceedings work. For example, in unborn baby cases this enables exploration of short- and long-term options when infants cannot safely remain living with their parents. In a small minority of cases, pre-proceedings are either not used or not considered, which creates potential delays in children's futures being resolved.
12. Work in the disabled children's team demonstrates an understanding of risk and the needs of children, many of whom have significant additional needs and may be non-verbal. Written plans require improvement to ensure that they are sufficiently focused, with actions and timescales to effect and maintain improvements in children's lives. Smooth transitions between children's and adults' services are facilitated by children's cases transferring to a young adult's team at age 16 and remaining with them until the young people are 25.
13. Practice arrangements for the support of some vulnerable groups have developed since the last inspection. Responses to children who are at risk of or who are experiencing child sexual exploitation have improved since the development of the role of the dedicated child sexual exploitation coordinator to improve information-sharing and partnership working with the police. Regular multi-agency child exploitation meetings demonstrate commitment from partners to engage with young people who are being exploited and to act to reduce risks. The child sexual exploitation screening tool is not yet being consistently used to inform, monitor or review all plans to reduce risk for children who are vulnerable to exploitation.
14. The recently introduced missing children officers have contributed to a reduction in the number of children who go missing. The number of children who are offered and who take up a timely return home interview has risen significantly from a very low base. Missing intervention meetings, which take place after a

child has had three missing episodes, include carers and professionals and result in coordinated interventions with children to help reduce the risk of children going missing.

15. Social workers understand and implement locally agreed processes when a risk of radicalisation is identified. Children are appropriately referred to the channel panel. Children at risk of honour-based violence and forced marriage are well supported.
16. Edge of care services are currently underdeveloped, and an edge of care team is not yet fully in place. Current efforts in the family support service to prevent entry to care are not always effective. In some cases, visits to family's lack purpose, although better practice includes creative work with families around 'rules' and boundaries to bring about change, improve children's relationships with their family members and reduce the risk of entry into care.
17. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of children and young people identified as missing education or at risk of missing education. Referrals are acted on by leaders, and the majority of cases are appropriately closed. Leaders across different teams hold separate intelligence about some cases, and this is not aggregated into one system that allows professionals to understand all of a child's needs. The local authority effectively monitors the quality of alternative provision. Providers are offered appropriate challenge and support.
18. The number of children who are electively home educated is rising. A newly implemented system provides a better understanding of the reasons for this. Despite establishing a timescale within which to assess the suitability of home education, the local authority is not meeting its own target due to staff workload and capacity. Leaders prioritise assessments of the most vulnerable pupils and work effectively with partners to support children to re-integrate into schools where this is appropriate.
19. The response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is poor. Assessments require improvement and are characterised by a lack of contact with young people, insufficient analysis of risk and poor evidence that young people are made aware of their entitlement to be accommodated and supported by the local authority. At best, this means that some vulnerable young people may not be provided with the opportunity to experience more security and the benefits attached to becoming looked after, and at worst, inadequately assessed young people are potentially being exposed to risk.
20. Concerns and allegations about professionals are well managed by the designated officer service. A new operating model that spreads the designated officer function across child protection chairs means that some position of trust meetings are not being convened in a timely way, and this has the potential to impact negatively on individuals involved.

21. Arrangements for privately fostered children are effective. Assessments are timely, and, once they are approved, an appropriate ongoing social work service is provided to privately fostered children.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Requires improvement to be good

22. When decisions are made for children to come in to care, these are appropriate, and, where necessary, immediate action is taken to safeguard children. Decisions are informed by timely and comprehensive assessments, with risks clearly identified and appropriate plans in place.
23. Effective parallel planning for young children ensures that adoption and plans for long-term fostering are progressed quickly. The quality of permanence planning for older children is more variable. Work to ensure that these children have permanent homes is not always pursued with enough pace or rigour. Managers and reviewing officers do not always take decisive action to tackle delay.
24. Most children live in placements that meet their needs, and they are making progress. The vast majority of children are settled where they are living, including the relatively small minority of children in care who live at a distance from Worcestershire.
25. When children return home from care, plans to support the family are in place. Despite this, the provision of ongoing family support is not always timely, meaning that in some cases families must wait for effective support at the most testing time in reunification. In some cases, there is a lack of contingency planning, meaning that some children may be at risk of returning to care.
26. Children are placed with brothers and sisters where this is in their best interests. Children benefit from supported contact with family members. These arrangements are regularly reviewed with children to ensure that their experiences of spending time with family and friends are positive.
27. Not all children who are in care and who are likely to remain in care have a life-story book to help them to understand why they are in care, and the work is not always completed by workers who are known to the children. This is not good practice and can be unsettling for children. To improve practice, the local authority has created a team of dedicated family support workers to undertake this work, but it is too early for this to benefit the many children still waiting.
28. Children in care benefit from the support of an independent advocate, with 124 children having advocacy contact in the last year and 23 having had an independent visitor. Children enjoy and value these relationships.

29. The long-term placement stability of most children in care has improved and is now in line with that of comparator local authorities. Despite this, a small number of children with complex needs experience a very high number of placements. This impacts on their ability to access ongoing support services. In these situations, the local authority struggles to both break the cycle and find suitable alternative accommodation. Managers have responded by successfully introducing consolidation meetings that prevent and reduce placement breakdown. The absence of disruption meetings following placement breakdowns is a missed opportunity for managers to learn from these situations and inform their future plans for children.
30. Children are encouraged to participate in their care planning reviews, which are well chaired by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Records of reviews are written to the child in a supportive and meaningful way to help them understand the decisions about their lives. Care plans are comprehensive, are updated regularly and are well matched to children's individual needs. IROs are active in ensuring that plans progress without delay in most cases. IROs use a well-developed escalation process to resolve practice issues.
31. Children in care who are at risk of going missing or child exploitation benefit from well-coordinated multi-agency intervention to reduce risks. Social workers for missing children provide consistency for young people, and interviews are offered promptly for almost all children in care, wherever they are placed.
32. Children and young people make good educational progress in care. Those who do not attend school have prompt access to suitable, good-quality registered alternative provision. Children's progress is closely reviewed through personal education plans which have well-written targets, and this is an improvement since the last inspection. Urgent action is taken if children are missing from education or if their attendance reduces.
33. There is no clear pathway for children in care to access mental health support. As a result, timely access to services for children experiencing emotional and mental health problems is poor.
34. Assessments of mainstream foster carers are timely, thorough and analytical. Supervising social workers understand the needs of the children placed with foster carers well, and help carers develop the necessary range of skills to meet those needs. However, not all foster carers take up the full range of training opportunities, and this limits some foster carers' skills.
35. Planning for children with a plan of adoption is a strength. Since February 2018, Worcestershire's adoption service has been provided through a regional adoption agency, Adoption Central England (ACE). A high proportion of children are leaving care without delay to join new adoptive families. Children are identified at an early stage at the Achieving Early Permanency Panel and are linked to family finders. Seven young children have benefited from foster for adoption

placements in the last year. There is effective use of the adoption support fund, and there have been no placement disruptions in the last 12 months.

36. The care leavers service, from a low base, has made some improvements and in most cases now meets the needs of young people.
37. Personal assistants (PAs) are allocated to work with young people when they become 17 years old; until they are 18, their existing social worker remains involved and supports their transition to young adulthood. Some young people are not allocated a PA until they are 17 and a half, which means that their preparation for independence is hampered. All care leavers aged between 18 and 21 have an allocated PA, and the local authority ensures that they offer services to and are in contact with most care leavers up to the age of 25.
38. PAs build positive relationships with the young people they work with and know them well. Some young people who are more vulnerable are not seen frequently enough for workers to accurately assess the levels of support they need. PAs are aspirational for their young people, consistently encouraging them to achieve in education and employment. The number of older care leavers in employment, education or training has risen in the last 12 months, and there are a good number of care leavers in further education and higher education. In addition, there are currently 14 care leavers undertaking apprenticeships. Only two of these apprenticeships are with the local authority and this represents a very low number given the size of the cohort.
39. Pathway plans are mostly completed with good participation by care leavers. They are written in the first person and detailed. Plans are up to date and have clear actions with timescales. 'Pathways on a page' provide care leavers with a good, straightforward overview of their plan.
40. Care leavers have access to duty points set up at venues in all district councils. This enables them to physically have access to help and support near to where they are living, and to somewhere they can drop in, helping to reduce isolation and maintain contact.
41. Most care leavers are offered and live in suitable accommodation. The available accommodation provides varying levels of support to meet the needs of young people. This includes 29 care leavers in staying put arrangements, which helps them to achieve positive outcomes through greater stability. Only four young people are in houses of multiple occupancy. In addition, outreach workers engage young people in a structured accredited independence skills course, with modules being signed off as skills are developed. This increases young people's confidence, enabling them to progress through various stages of accommodation with reduced levels of support and scrutiny.
42. Some young people over 18 years old are having to live in bed and breakfast accommodation. Over the last 12 months, 17 care leavers over the age of 18

have been placed in such accommodation, with four young people currently living in such accommodation. In addition, a further 10 care leavers are currently homeless, although they are not living on the streets. Senior leaders do not collate data about this instability in accommodation for care leavers, and this means that they may not have sufficient overall awareness of the extent of the situation and the need for strategic intervention as a result. The unacceptable practice of using bed and breakfast accommodation for some care leavers was noted at the last inspection, and senior leaders have not acted to improve the situation.

43. Care leavers do not have a dedicated pathway to adult mental health services. Care leavers report that they are 'bounced from pillar to post, and nothing happens until it's a crisis'. This means that too many care leavers are not having their mental health needs met. Care leavers have access to their health histories.
44. Care leavers are aware of their entitlements, and the offer of a range of benefits, including a passport or a driving licence. Although there is an entitlement offer, it is not written in a way that is welcoming or responsive to care leavers' concerns.

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

45. The local authority has made considerable progress in many areas in improving the quality of services for children and families since the inspection in 2016. The vast majority of the recommendations for improvement made at the last inspection have been dealt with and have resulted in improvements to services and better outcomes for children. Senior leaders and elected members are ambitious and have made progress in improving outcomes for children. Children in Worcestershire are now better protected than they were, and the trajectory for further improvement is established. Despite financial pressures, there is a commitment to children's services and a focus on ensuring the well-being, safety and outcomes of children in the county.
46. Senior managers have taken the essential steps to meet the goals of their social care improvement plan. Combined with the restructure of services, they have ensured that changes to core practice are embedded, and that invested resources focus on delivering better outcomes for children. These improvements are being demonstrated in many areas.
47. However, in some key areas these improvements are not yet making a sufficient difference for children. Despite a renewed focus by the local authority on the importance of partnership working, the early help partnership is not yet sufficiently robust to ensure that all partners take active leadership roles in the provision of early help intervention. As a result, the local authority provides

almost all early help interventions at level three but is not yet able to ensure that families get help when they need it, and some wait for many weeks.

48. Joint commissioning with health has not resulted in any clearly identifiable mental health pathway for children in care or care leavers. The absence of an established priority for access means that they are having to wait several weeks to be seen, with the prospect of a further waiting list for intervention.
49. The local authority continues to use bed and breakfast accommodation for some care leavers and has not improved this situation since the last inspection. For 16- and 17-year-old young people who present as homeless, there is little evidence that the local authority's own policies and processes are being adhered to, and few young people are being told about or offered the opportunity of care. In some of these cases, risk and vulnerability is inadequately assessed, which potentially leaves young people exposed to further risk.
50. The quality of supervision offered to social workers is inconsistent. There are gaps in frequency and recording in some teams and a lack of challenge and reflection, which acts as a barrier to better practice. Although there has been an increasing focus on getting it right, some aspects of social work practice are not yet good.
51. The local authority has implemented a quality assurance system and has established a range of performance information, allowing senior managers to better understand its practice. Auditing of work is undertaken on a regular basis and is strengthened by a moderation system that gives the local authority a clear understanding of practice compliance. Some inconsistency in the quality of evaluations at team manager level remains, with not all team managers demonstrating an understanding of what good practice looks like. Actions arising from audits have not always had a timely resolution, and the local authority cannot be clear that learning has occurred as a result. Audits do not always focus sufficiently on outcomes for children, and this is a necessary step to help the move to good practice.
52. Effective work has strengthened the workforce. Use of agency staff has reduced and the stability of staff in post has increased. The establishment of a social work academy has meant that there are increased opportunities for the local authority to 'grow' its own staff. The introduction of the role of advanced social work practitioners has strengthened career opportunities and the range of experience within teams. Caseloads have reduced overall, but there remains some unevenness across teams, which the authority is committed to resolving. Staff are positive about changes that have been implemented, including that a strengths-based model of social work intervention is in place and embedded.

53. Effective partnership working between the police and social workers for children vulnerable to sexual exploitation and going missing means that the response to such concerns is often strong. Effective sharing of information enables the mapping of people of concern with locations where children may be exposed to exploitation. Joint operations have been successful in disrupting perpetrators and safeguarding children.
54. Good strategic partnerships have enabled the development of an encompassing exploitation strategy, GetSafe, in recognition of the previous approach being underdeveloped and needing to be strengthened to be effective. Senior leaders and partners understand the impact of county lines on vulnerable children, but it is too early for the new strategy to demonstrate a positive impact and improve the effectiveness of their responses.
55. The local authority has a positive relationship with both the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and a good reputation with the local judiciary. Both CAFCASS and the courts are positive about improvements to the local authority's ability to bring cases before the courts on a timely basis, in social work practice and to the quality of evidence.
56. Success in implementing the 2016–18 sufficiency strategy is very limited. The proposed edge of care service will only be implemented later this summer, recruitment of new fostering households has fallen well below targets and attempts to increase the number of 'placement plus' carers has also not been successful. The overall rise in numbers of children in care means that pressures on in-house provision are acute, but this has been mitigated by the increasing use of independent provision.
57. Since the last inspection, corporate parenting has been strengthened. The corporate parenting board is an active advocate of young people's needs, and it has good young person representation. Children in care and care leavers are represented by two positive and vocal groups: 'Who cares – we care' and 'Speak Out'. Young people say they are being heard and have been able to influence the local authority in the creation of policy.



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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

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