

Inspection of Worcestershire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 15 to 26 May 2023

Lead inspector: Rebecca Quested, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection, in June 2019, when services for children and families in Worcestershire were judged requires improvement to be good, progress has been made in many areas where improvements were needed. The local authority had previously been judged inadequate in 2016, and following statutory direction from the Department for Education the council agreed to work in partnership to create Worcestershire Children First (WCF), a wholly owned council company. In October 2019, WCF took over operational responsibility for the delivery of children's services on behalf of Worcestershire County Council. The WCF senior leadership team has continued to work effectively with political leaders and partners to improve children's experiences.

Alongside these changes and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been continued progress in improvements to the early help offer and strengthening the family front door (FFD). Strong work with children and families to divert children from care and to improve the timeliness of care proceedings is leading to positive changes for children. Most children's outcomes improve as a result of family-focused, child-centred early help and proportionate statutory intervention when this is in the best interests of children.

Senior leaders know there is more to do to ensure that all children in care receive a consistent social work service, and have plans in place to progress this.

What needs to improve?

- Effective analysis of risk by the local authority designated officer team (LADO).
- A consistent service for all children in care, including the timely progression of their plans for permanence.
- Consistency in the leaving care service received by care leavers who are subject to special guardianship orders (SGOs).
- Children and care leavers' participation in influencing service delivery and strategic developments.

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

1. Children and families benefit from a comprehensive range of early help services in Worcestershire. Children who are referred to early help services or stepped down from the FFD have the right thresholds of need applied. However, some children experience delay in their assessment starting, so early help workers remain in contact with families to ensure they can respond to any change in circumstances. Assessments are thorough, including the views of families and children and multi-agency input, and result in an effective plan of intervention for children and their families.
2. Contact and referrals into the FFD are dealt with in a timely way. Thresholds are well understood and applied. The gaining of consent is considered and is appropriately overridden where this is required. Management oversight is prompt and a clear rationale is recorded for all decision-making. This leads to children receiving the right level of support and protection.
3. Strategy meetings take place promptly and involve the relevant partners. Multi-agency information-sharing contributes to appropriate decisions and clear and agreed plans of action. For most children, realistic safety planning is in place during the enquiries. The majority of child protection enquiries are detailed and address the child's risks and needs. This results in effective decision-making for children.
4. The response to domestic abuse referrals is well embedded in the FFD. Contacts are managed sensitively to mitigate risk to victims. Social workers obtain information from key agencies which leads to clear analysis of risk to inform the immediate and ongoing safety planning for children.
5. The recording of decision-making by the emergency duty team (EDT) lacks clarity for some children. Social workers visit children and families promptly and

ensure safety plans are in place. Communication between the social workers in EDT and daytime services ensures seamless support to children and families.

6. The LADO service is not consistently effective in its oversight of allegations against those in a position of trust. Although decision-making and meetings are timely, the analysis of presenting risk is not consistent for all children. The LADO service undertakes regular multi-agency training to promote awareness of their role.
7. Children's assessments are comprehensive and completed within appropriate timescales. Social workers ensure they gain an understanding of children's cultural needs and identity as well as experiences, and how any risks or concerns impact on children's safety and progress. Relevant information is gathered from partner agencies, which leads to a clear analysis that informs children's plans. For most children, this results in interventions that make a difference and improve their outcomes.
8. The majority of children's plans, whether they need help or protection, consider children's needs and are clear as to the actions needed to address concerns or risks. Children in need benefit from the Supporting Families First service. This multi-agency service is led by advanced social work practitioners and includes money mentors, family support workers, youth workers, substance misuse workers and outreach workers who support children and families in the way that families identify will help them. This service is very effective and results in concerns reducing and most children being successfully diverted from care and able to remain living with their families.
9. When children are the subject of child protection plans, social workers use targeted services that help children understand their circumstances and support parents in reducing risk. Multi-agency meetings are regular and well attended, and contribute to shared decision-making that prioritises children.
10. When risks increase for children on child protection plans, there is an appropriate escalation into pre-proceedings. This area of work is a strength in Worcestershire and for most children it is effective in reducing risk. Social workers complete assessments of parents and family members and timely decisions are made for children if legal proceedings are initiated. Letters before proceedings are clear about what the concerns are and what needs to change. Careful monitoring of children subject to pre-proceedings prevents any drift and delay. As a result, children's experiences and outcomes improve.
11. Social workers visit the majority of children regularly and get to know them well. Children receive a sensitive approach from their social workers which enables them to develop positive relationships. This is recorded in a child-centred way which ensures that children, should they read their case records now or in the future, will be able to understand how their social workers were supporting them.

12. The response to children at risk of exploitation is coordinated effectively through the Get Safe service. Social workers complete thorough assessments which are shared at regular multi-agency information meetings, where there is careful consideration of risk and clear plans for intervention and disruption activities. Children who have been missing receive prompt return home interviews that identify potential risks and inform future planning. Multi-agency meetings take place when there is an increase in episodes of children going missing. Detailed plans are developed at these meetings which lead to successful interventions for children.
13. Social workers for disabled children develop positive relationships with them and advocate strongly on their behalf. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments which consider the child's needs, history and current concerns, as well as the voice of the child. These lead to effective support and safety plans. Families with disabled children can access a wide range of services that provide appropriate levels of support to meet their needs.
14. When 16- and 17-year-olds present as homeless, they receive a well-coordinated response from housing and children's services. The professionals in the Homeless Intervention Team ensure that these vulnerable children have their accommodation and support needs dealt with in one place. Children are supported to remain with their families when it is safe to do so. Others are informed of routes into either housing or coming into care, to support them in their decision-making.
15. There is an established response to children who are identified as being privately fostered. Social work assessments of children who are living 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 being met. Regular awareness-raising, particularly in schools, has been effective.
16. There are appropriate systems in place to locate and monitor children who are missing education or who are electively home educated. Suitable education placements are identified for those children who are missing education.

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

17. Despite the positive experiences of many children in care, a significant number of children are not yet receiving the same quality of service or making the same progress, due to workforce challenges in this part of the service.
18. Decisions to bring children into care are appropriate. The application of the Public Law Outline when children come into care in Worcestershire is effective. Once children come into care, good decisions are made to work towards

achieving permanence for most children. Social work evidence and plans are of a high quality. There is strong partnership working with the family courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to achieve positive and timely outcomes for children.

19. Most children are living in settled and stable living arrangements, where their carers understand and meet their needs well. Children live with their brothers and sisters where possible, following appropriate assessment of each individual child's needs. Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives and family time arrangements are in line with children's needs and wishes. As a result, many children in care are making good progress.
20. Senior leaders and managers have appropriate oversight of the small number of children who are living in unregistered settings. Although this is clearly unsuitable, they ensure that children are visited regularly and move on to appropriate regulated care quickly. Children's voices are heard and progress is made.
21. For most children who are living outside of Worcestershire, their needs are well met and they are making progress.
22. Following thorough assessment, children return home from being in care when there is progress in their parents' ability to care for them. After they return home, children are consistently visited to ensure change has been sustained and they continue to be safely parented.
23. Most children's plans address their needs and are detailed and identify next steps. Early permanence, when there is a plan that may include adoption, is well considered and proceeds swiftly. Children's plans are regularly reviewed at meetings, which are well attended by parents and professionals involved in children's lives. However, for some children, the independence of their review had been compromised as their independent reviewing officer (IRO) was carrying out their statutory visits. This practice was stopped earlier this year.
24. IROs appropriately visit most children before their reviews to gain their views and encourage them to attend their meeting. There is variability in children's attendance at their reviews. However, children's views are well considered at the meetings and IROs ensure that the record of the meeting is written in a child-friendly way. IROs appropriately and successfully escalate their concerns about the progress of children's plans.
25. Most children have positive and trusting relationships with their social workers. However, for a significant number of children in care who have recently experienced a change in their allocated social worker, there are delays in the initial contact with children and carers being made, gaps in statutory visiting and delays in completing important pieces of work. While these children's living arrangements are stable, they are not being given the same level of service as

other children in care. The impact of high social worker caseloads is mitigated by the deployment of family support workers to undertake visits to these children. However, this means these children are not able to build a long-term relationship with a qualified social worker who can advocate on their behalf, including to secure appropriate permanence. Senior leaders made plans during the inspection to strengthen these arrangements.

26. Where social workers have lower caseloads, they undertake age-appropriate and purposeful direct work with children and listen to their wishes, which supports decision-making around their care. Children who have been in care for many years are supported with life-story work and later-in-life letters to help them understand their journey into care or to assist in understanding their trauma from their early life experiences.
27. Senior leaders are not enabling children to contribute sufficiently to the corporate parenting board or to influence service provision or development. However, when children make complaints, they are well supported and consistently offered an advocate to represent their views.
28. Children have their health needs well met. Social workers have oversight of children's health needs, including routine health appointments. When they visit children, they focus on what support would benefit children with their emotional well-being. Where appropriate, children can access support for their emotional well-being, including through the in-house 'Anchor' service.
29. The virtual school ensures that most children in care receive a good-quality education. Personal education plans (PEPs) appropriately identify the additional support children require and as a result they are progressing well. Children are encouraged to enjoy various activities and hobbies. This includes all children in care being given a bicycle, which promotes improved self-esteem and social skills.
30. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive in Worcestershire, either through the national transfer scheme or independently, are well supported. Children are allocated a social worker who has specific knowledge and skills in working with unaccompanied children. Children are appropriately matched to foster carers or are living in semi-supported accommodation which meets their needs. Children's cultural, linguistic and religious identities are considered and social workers ensure that interpreting services are used so that children can share their views.
31. Most children in care who go missing receive timely return home interviews that detail circumstances and the areas of risk. Social workers are alert to risks associated with exploitation and resulting assessments ensure a detailed plan is developed. There is a swift response to increasing episodes of going missing and social workers take prompt action that, for most children, reduces their episodes of going missing.

32. Most children with a plan for long-term fostering have stability and are matched to their long-term foster carers. These children are making progress both socially and educationally. Despite some children living with the same foster carers for many years, they have experienced drift and delay in securing legal permanence through an SGO when that is in their best interests. This means these children have been subjected to unnecessary statutory intervention that is not commensurate with their needs. During the inspection, senior leaders decided to expand their current adoption tracker to all areas of permanence, to ensure that they are considering the timeliness of permanence for all children.
33. Some children aged 16 who are subject to an SGO are entitled to a leaving care service, however, are not able to access services as their cases have already been closed.
34. Foster carers, including kinship carers, are appropriately assessed, trained and supported. As a result, foster carers are well equipped to meet the needs of children in their care. However, the number of mainstream foster carer approvals is not at the level needed to meet the needs of children in care and there is ongoing work to understand the impact of marketing and recruitment activity.
35. Early permanence is secured for children who have a plan for adoption. Pre-birth assessments lead to appropriate protection and legal planning so that children can be safeguarded effectively at birth. There is close collaborative working between WCF and the regional adoption agency (Adoption Central England). Adoption assessments, approvals and matching are timely.
36. Children are prepared effectively and matched with adopters, providing them with security and stability. Introductions to adopters are well considered and carefully planned at a pace that is right for children. Birth parents are appropriately signposted to post-adoption support services.
37. Children who are adopted are helped to understand their life histories and identities through direct work, sensitively written life-story books and skilfully written later-in-life letters. For a small number of children, these letters have not been completed in a timely way and management oversight has not identified this prior to their case records being closed.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

38. Children are allocated a personal adviser (PA) when they are aged 17. This gives PAs the opportunity to understand children's history and build a relationship with them before their transition to the leaving care team when they reach adulthood.

39. Most care leavers have a positive relationship with their PA. The majority of PAs are persistent in maintaining contact with young people and act as good parents, with most having a 'never give up' attitude which young people value. Interpreters are involved in meetings and visits when required to ensure that young people's wishes and feelings are understood. Care leavers aged 21, and up to the age of 25, continue to receive a service when appropriate to enable them to make good progress in their lives.
40. Most care leavers' health needs are met through a variety of health services. They are encouraged to seek support for their emotional well-being, with PAs making referrals to appropriate services. Care leavers are provided with their health histories, which enables them to understand their health and development.
41. The majority of care leavers are made aware of their rights and entitlements, with PAs encouraging them to access the local offer. The core of the local offer means that young people receive council tax exemption if they live in Worcestershire, and receive the appropriate recently increased setting up home grant and matched funding for driving lessons. The local offer could be improved by more clearly addressing young people's access to the internet and to local leisure activities.
42. Care leavers who came into care because they were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a high level of support. PAs place an emphasis on education, with the majority of these young people attending college. PAs are knowledgeable about how young people can access legal support during leave to remain applications. Careful consideration is given to ensuring care leavers can access local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs.
43. When care leavers are in custody, attempts are made to keep in touch with them. However, gaps in the allocation of PAs means that some do not consistently have access to services, including accommodation available for them on their release from custody. As a result, a very small number are living in unsuitable accommodation, such as B&Bs.
44. PAs have a good understanding of the risks care leavers can be exposed to and take appropriate action to safeguard and promote their safety. PAs are alert to issues of exploitation and risks associated with poor mental health, providing additional support themselves and by engaging partner agencies when this is required.
45. PAs engage well with care leavers who are parents, to support them to care for their children. Relationships between young parents and PAs are strong, with PAs maintaining regular contact with them and providing emotional and practical support.

46. Most care leavers are living in accommodation that is safe and supports their needs. They are well prepared for moving to semi-independent living at 18. 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.
47. Care leavers' access to education, employment and training is variable. Some care leavers access sensitive and bespoke careers advice which supports them to access job and training opportunities, including apprenticeships with WCF. However, opportunities for employment and apprenticeships with the local authority or local businesses are not yet well established.
48. Most care leavers have a detailed pathway plan that supports them to progress. Pathway plans are completed collaboratively with young people and routinely include the input of other partner agencies. Most young people's pathway plans are updated to reflect their current situation. The recently developed 'plan on a page' was co-produced with care leavers and provides an accessible way to share plans with young people.

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

49. Since October 2019, WCF has had operational responsibility for the delivery of children's services on behalf of Worcestershire County Council (WCC). All statutory children's social care functions are now delegated to WCF. A permanent senior leadership team in WCF has continued to work effectively with political leaders to improve outcomes for children in Worcestershire. There is a coordinated drive to continue to improve children's experiences.
50. Significant progress has been made in all those areas identified at previous inspections and visits as needing to improve. These include development of the early help offer, improved timeliness of strategy meetings and the recording of management rationale for decision-making in the FFD service, the response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless and to those children who are at risk of coming into care.
51. Senior leaders have made considerable progress in ensuring that there is now consistent application of thresholds across children's services. This means that the majority of children and care leavers receive a service which improves their outcomes.
52. Relationships with key partners are effective. The FFD is strengthened by improved relationships with police and health and education services. There are clear lines of accountability and there is a culture of being able to safely challenge partner agencies.

53. Feedback from external partner agencies, such as Cafcass and the family courts, highlights that senior leaders work successfully with their partners. This has resulted in improved outcomes for children through the timely completion of care proceedings.
54. As corporate parents, WCC and WCF are committed to children. The corporate parenting board is well attended by councillors and senior leaders in children's services. Currently, too few children and young people have the opportunity to engage in activities that would inform the services they experience. Senior leaders need to be more engaged with children in care and care leavers. There is also more to do for WCC as a corporate parent to support care leavers with opportunities for employment, including apprenticeships.
55. Senior leaders understand local communities and ensure that services are responsive to children's and families' needs. They are developing the early help services further, including through family hubs. They have developed the multidisciplinary Supporting Families First service, which is successfully diverting children from care by supporting families to meet the needs of their children.
56. For children in care, in-house services have been developed where senior leaders recognise they will improve outcomes for children, such as 'Anchor', to improve the emotional well-being support to children in care. Senior leaders ensure that children in care are living in caring and stable homes. Although permanence is appropriately secured through adoption, there is more to do to ensure that that children in long-term care have permanence secured through other routes such as SGOs.
57. Senior leaders know their service well and are swift to respond to changes in demand or need to improve children's experiences. This is evident in the prompt response to the recent increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care and in improvements to areas of practice identified following serious incidents. Senior leaders remain sighted on areas of vulnerability such as the increasing numbers of children who are on repeat child protection plans.
58. There are workforce challenges in the children in care service. Although there has been some success in recruiting social workers, posts remain vacant. This has led to the development of alternative means to ensure that children have an allocated worker. However, despite these efforts, there are still a significant number of children in care who are not receiving a consistent experience of social work practice, with frequent changes of social worker and a lack of progression of key elements of their plans. During the inspection, senior leaders developed plans to improve the outcomes of these children.
59. Most of the performance management systems allow for oversight of performance through data that is used to inform practice both strategically and at operational team level. Senior leaders responded swiftly when inspectors

identified weaknesses in the strategic oversight of children's permanence and developed plans to improve this.

60. Senior leaders' understanding of practice is informed by audit practice undertaken both within WCF and also with partners. Audits are strengthened through the involvement of children, carers and parents and through moderation. Learning from audits leads to improvements in practice which ensures the effective closing of the loop. A variety of methods are used to gain feedback from children, parents and carers which influences service developments, together with any learning from complaints.
61. There is a comprehensive development offer for social workers and managers in WCF. However, recent social work vacancies have resulted in higher workloads for some social work staff in the children in care service and for PAs. Senior leaders are sighted on this issue and have experienced some success in recruiting newly qualified social workers. However, they are aware there is more to do.
62. The majority of workers across all areas of the service are positive about working for WCF. They receive regular supervision, which provides an opportunity to reflect on practice, in addition to ensuring that most children's plans are progressing. Workers describe the culture as supportive within and between teams and the senior leadership team as visible and accessible.

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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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