
OFSTED ILACS Inspection- September 2024

Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny
Commission

Date of meeting: 25 February 2025

Lead Director/officer: Laurence Jones

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
- Report author: Laurence Jones
- Author contact details: laurence.jones@leicester.gov.uk
- Report version number: 1.4

1. Summary

- 1.1 Ofsted undertook an inspection under the “inspecting local authority children’s services” (ILACS) framework in September 2024. This was a short inspection and so was made up of a week off site analytical activity followed by a week with a team of inspectors on site speaking to staff and partners and reviewing cases. A copy of the final report, published on 29 January 2025, is attached as **Appendix A**. Prior to this Ofsted visit last inspection took place at the end of the pandemic in 2021 and found that services were “good” in the context of Leicester having been in a very long period of lock down and social work practice with children had been heavily modified due to the restrictions in place. The current context of work in the city is very different and the needs of children, and the whole population, have been significantly impacted by the pressures on families and emotional and mental health challenges during the pandemic period.
- 1.2 The latest report gives an overall rating of “requires improvement to be good” and identifies areas that need strengthening for impact to consistently “good”. There are a large number of strengths in the report. Of the key areas for improvement identified in the 2021 report (private fostering, designated officer arrangements, sufficiency of placements, consistency of recording, case file auditing) all have been resolved. There has been significant change in senior leadership in the department with both Divisional Directors and the Strategic Director starting in role in the year before the inspection. The report notes that “leaders have maintained a supportive environment and ensured that caseloads remain at manageable levels” and that “Social Workers know their children well and speak about them with knowledge and sensitivity”. The effectiveness of the relationship between early help services and more formal social care services is singled out for praise, as is the managing of allegations against professionals, the response to exploitation, young carers, disabled children and the approach to regulated services such as fostering and adoption. The thresholds for the involvement of services, formal child protection plans and children entering the care system were found to be appropriate.
- 1.3 The report identifies a number of priority areas for improvement, nearly all of which had already been identified by leaders prior to the inspection and which in many cases have begun to be addressed in the six months since the inspection.
- 1.4 A summary of actions against the five key areas for improvement highlighted by Ofsted is described below. This will be overseen by a Board chaired by the Strategic Director (and statutory Director of Childrens Services) which will meet regularly from March 2025 and will report regularly to the Executive on progress. A full improvement, which also covers the government reforms set out in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill is attached as **Appendix B**. The reforms have come with an additional grant of £2.6m for the next financial year. This will be used in part to boost social worker numbers, which are the lowest per head of child in the East Midlands, and to increase the capacity of managers to deliver on the areas highlighted below.

1.5 The five areas that Ofsted have identified for improvement and the current position is as follows:

The range and accuracy of information used by leaders to evaluate service performance and the quality and impact of management oversight and supervision

1.6 Whilst there is a large range of well checked and timely information available to managers, we are reviewing this and bench marking with the information available in similar authorities where Ofsted have not found this to be an issue. Whilst the information is expanded and improved compared to that at the previous inspection, it may be that other authorities have developed their suite of data more, raising expectations. The opportunities to use artificial intelligence are largely untapped in Leicester City and this will be an area of focus for the coming year.

1.7 The relative youth and inexperience of middle management in Leicester was highlighted to inspectors prior to the inspection week, and we recognise that in recent years there has not been any formal development programme for managers, and that some of the guidance and structured paperwork in place has been unhelpful and despite challenge by staff this has not been addressed. This will have impacted on the good practice being evidenced for every child and family in case files, even when the practice itself is sound. We have begun to review the paperwork used, and our guidance to staff, and expect to commission a programme of development for managers to commence shortly and run for some time to support cultural change and professional development. Leicester has had an approach of growing our own leaders from our practitioner cohort, and as such limited experience from outside the authority has been drawn in. This approach needs to be reviewed alongside the support for early careers in leadership.

The timeliness and robustness of responses to contacts and referrals and the quality and consistency of care plans and pathway plans

1.8 Ofsted found evidence of good practice in these areas, but also some inconsistencies, so that not every child is receiving the same quality of service. We are looking to strengthen our management oversight and quality assurance, as well as the structure and accessibility of some of our documentation, to support the development of consistent social work practice. We intend to recruit an additional head of service and increase our quality assurance officer and Principal Social Worker time to support these developments early in 2025. We are also looking with the Department for Education to identify a Sector-led Improvement Partner (SLIP), who are an outstanding authority, to support us in focusing on this element of our improvement work. We plan to recruit thirteen additional social workers, alongside two Independent Reviewing Officers, two Multi-Systemic Therapists and four staff focused on Family Group Decision Making. This will improve capacity and have an impact on caseloads to allow more time to concentrate of timeliness and quality.

Arrangements to Identify, safeguard and support the most vulnerable children in care and care leavers, including children in unregistered children's homes

1.9 We have immediately reviewed the oversight and contact levels for the small number of children in care who might be at increased risk and increased management oversight and new procedures are in place to provide greater assurance. Whilst we use providers who have a proven track record and pass our own quality assurance processes, and so were broadly assured of the children's safety, more regular oversight through face-to-face meetings with qualified Social Workers was needed, recognising that Ofsted cannot provide any assurance about the safety of these placements given their lack of registration. Leicester has relatively small numbers in unregulated placements but

recognises that any child in a technically unlawful placement is one too many. There are currently eight children in unregulated placements out of 600 in the care of the authority. We are continuing to open new residential children's home provision to reduce the numbers still further. Holly House opened this year and Hill View is due to open later this year. There are further expansions of the estate planned through the shortly to be published Sufficiency Strategy.

Support for care leavers who may be more reluctant to accept help, including those in custody and those facing homelessness.

- 1.10 We will continue to consider our rights-based approach, allowing young adults with mental capacity to make their own decisions, balanced against the need to continue to be a strident corporate parent into early adulthood. Some of the specific areas to be addressed in the report will be difficult to achieve as for example it is simply not possible any more under prison service rules to visit young adults who do not want to be visited by us or to telephone or email prisoners without their permission. We will also consider how we might support young people who are homeless but not in the city given the two cases cited by Ofsted were in London and Edinburgh so could not practically access our priority housing locally even had they wanted our assistance.
- 1.11 The judgement by Ofsted in this area is new and has not featured in previous inspections and the focus is welcomed. We had a visit from the Department for Education's Leaving Care Advisor last August whose judgement was slightly different in that he felt the leaving care service were "good with outstanding features". He left us with areas for development, different from those identified by Ofsted, which we agree with and are actively working on to improve our offer. We have used all of these insights to strengthen the offer.

Ofsted's Response to the Complaint About The Inspection Process

- 2.1 The publication of the report by several months was due to Ofsted responding to a complaint about the inspection process made by the local authority. We have not complained about the content of the final report after changes made during the factual accuracy check. The authority had received a verbal apology during the on-site week about inspector behaviour, but at the conclusion of the week remained significantly concerned about the way that the inspection has been conducted and so made this formal. Ofsted initially refused to investigate the complaint, but after challenge reviewed their decision. The Ofsted complaint process is an internal review by Ofsted themselves and there is no right of appeal. The majority of points in the complaint about how evidence was gathered and the fairness of the approach used were largely dismissed by Ofsted who felt they had acted in accordance with the framework and that the judgements of inspectors, whilst subjective, were fair. However, they did apologise for failing to give the correct information in the set-up meeting about their key lines of enquiry to allow the authority to collate the best evidence to put before inspectors.
- 2.2 There are two other areas of complaint which are worth highlighting as areas where the concerns of leaders and staff remain unresolved. Ofsted were asked if the inspection team had training in unconscious bias and how to address this in the inspection process but declined to directly answer this question. They were also challenged about how they raised concerns in individual care work in line with their published framework. All issues they raised were responded to by the local authority swiftly either through explanation or action. Despite the published framework being checked at the time of the complaint being made, Ofsted state that the referred to part of the framework was

not in place at the time of the inspection. The history of changes to that framework on the government website shows the guidance was changed in December 2025, after both the inspection and the complaint.

2. Recommended actions/decision

The Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Commission is invited to comment on the report and the proposed improvement plan.

3. Scrutiny / stakeholder engagement

This report is produced for scrutiny by the Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Commission.

5. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

5.1 Financial implications

The recommendations in this report will be funded within existing budgets.

Signed: Mohammed Irfan

Dated: 22.01.2025

5.2 Legal implications

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report

Signed: Kamal Adatia

Dated:21.01.2025

5.3 Equalities implications

Children's Services are responsible for protecting and promoting the welfare of children in need in the city and also for ensuring that everyone is in receipt of education. The report provides an update on Ofsted's ILACS inspection in December of 2024. Leicester has larger proportions of younger people compared to England. According to census information, the city has a much higher level of ethnic diversity amongst its children and young people than most other council areas. The Index of Deprivation 2019 showed that Leicester is ranked as the 32nd most deprived out of 151 local authority areas in England, deprivation has an important impact on children's lives and health. The framework aims not to be dependent on one major single inspection event but to provide insight to Ofsted on the performance and direction of travel for the authority. Delivering effective children's services that champion the needs and improved outcomes for children and young people, should lead to positive impacts for children and young people from across all protected characteristics. The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework focuses on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements: • to help and protect children (from across all protected characteristics) • the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home • the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption • the experiences and progress of care leavers They also evaluate: • the effectiveness of leaders

and managers • the impact they have on the lives of children and young people • the quality of professional practice One of the underpinning principles of the inspection is focussing on the things that matter most to children’s lives. Inspectors should be consistent in inspections while being flexible enough to respond to the individual circumstances of each local authority. They should take appropriate action to comply with Ofsted’s duties under the Equality Act 2010.

Signed: Equalities Officer, Surinder Singh

Dated: 22 January 2025

5.4 Climate Emergency implications

There are no significant climate emergency implications arising from this report.

Signed: Duncan Bell, Change Manager (Climate Emergency). Ext. 37 2249.

Dated: 22.01.25

5.5 Other implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)

6. Background information and other papers:

7. Summary of appendices:

Appendix A: ILACS Inspection Report

8. Is this a private report (If so, please indicate the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)?

9. Is this a “key decision”? If so, why?