

Inspection of Leicester City Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 September 2024

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, His 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 | Requires improvement to be good |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers | Requires improvement to be good |
| Overall effectiveness | Requires improvement to be good |

Leicester has a young and diverse population. Nearly 70% of the school population is made up of global majority groups. This brings dynamism to the city but also challenges in terms of the range and complexity of need and the impact of poverty and racism. Despite the clear commitment of leaders to meet these challenges and do the right things for vulnerable children in Leicester, the overall effectiveness of services to support children and families in Leicester has declined since the last inspection in 2021. Although there have been recent changes in the senior leadership team, including a new Strategic Director Social Care and Education who is also director of children's services, leaders have maintained a supportive environment and ensured that caseloads remain at manageable levels. Alongside examples of stronger practice across parts of the service, inspectors found a lack of professional curiosity and services not responding effectively to children's increasing needs. Managers are not always identifying this or providing appropriate direction or challenge. Senior leaders were not sufficiently sighted on these issues.

What needs to improve?

- The range and accuracy of information used by leaders to evaluate service performance and the quality and impact of management oversight and supervision.
- The timeliness and robustness of responses to contacts and referrals.
- The quality and consistency of care plans and pathway plans.
- Arrangements to identify, safeguard and support the most vulnerable children in care and care leavers, including children in unregistered children's homes.
- Support for care leavers who may be more reluctant to accept help, including those in custody and those facing homelessness.

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

1. Contacts to the children's advice support and prevention team (CASP) at the integrated front door in Leicester City are made promptly by external professionals. The appropriate nature of contacts indicates an understanding of thresholds by agency partners, however, information provided by agencies is of variable quality. The CASP team delivers an effective out-of-hours service to children in the city and provides a clear and swift handover of information to daytime staff.
2. Inspectors found a small number of examples of delays in contacts being responded to and entered on the electronic recording system. In these examples, the date of contact is shown as the date the contact has been created, not the date it was received. This means some children wait a number of days before their contact is responded to, and performance data in this area is not accurate.
3. Social workers understand the need to seek parental consent before information-sharing begins. When consent is dispensed with, management agreement to override the need for consent is not always recorded on children's records.
4. The co-location of early help and social care helps cases to be transitioned seamlessly and with no delay. Clear processes ensure that practitioners know how to step children's cases up from early help to children's social care.
5. Early help workers apply appropriate thresholds, overseen and guided by managers, to ensure that they request cases step up to children's social care (CSC) when risks and concerns escalate. Early help assessments are detailed and take care to consider children individually. Plans are appropriately pitched and progress is reviewed by managers to ensure progress is made for children. Step down processes are also clear and social workers ensure that early help workers, and families, know the scope and nature of early help

support that is needed. While there is a waiting list for early help, this affects only a few children, and they do not have to wait long for support.

6. Responses by the CASP to contacts and referrals do not always demonstrate sufficient professional curiosity or fully consider family history. This means that children are not always receiving the support they need.
7. In cases viewed as less urgent, there are sometimes delays in convening strategy meetings. This means that for some children there are delays in sharing important information and agreeing actions to keep them safer.
8. Strategy meetings are well attended by key partners and appropriate actions are identified to ensure children are safeguarded. Once immediate actions to safeguard children have been taken, thorough S47 enquiries are completed. These consider risk in the context of the wider family, and most contain detailed partner agency information and social work analysis. Children are seen and direct work is completed with them to ensure their voice and experiences are understood. Decisions about next steps, including whether to hold initial child protection conferences, are appropriate.
9. Where domestic abuse is a feature of contacts, social workers consider history and the cumulative impact of abuse. Interim safety plans are discussed with the 'protective' parent. The language used and the expectations set out in these plans often place high levels of responsibility on the protective parent and do not indicate a thorough understanding of the trauma they may have experienced.
10. Assessments incorporate children's and families' histories and previous episodes of involvement from children's social care or early help services. This helps workers to understand, assess and analyse recent events in the context of known family behaviour and relevant previous incidents.
11. Social workers know their children well and speak about them with knowledge and sensitivity. Most children in need or subject to child protection plans are visited in accordance with their plan. Visits are mostly purposeful and seek the views of children and their families. For some children, effective direct work is completed to help them understand why there is social work involvement in their lives. This is done using a range of activities, including conversational play, games, word play and situational conversations.
12. The quality of plans varies and while they identify needs, actions are not always sufficiently specific in terms of timescales and the outcomes being sought. Over-optimism about the sustainability of change means that some children are stepped down from child protection plans too soon.
13. For most disabled children in need of support, their disability and the impact it has on their life and their family's life is well recognised and appropriate support is offered.

14. The response provided to children who experience neglect is not consistently effective. In cases that have been held for longer, there is sometimes avoidable delay in recognising that children's experiences are not improving. When decisions are made to enter the Public Law Outline, there are generally effective systems in place to track and review children. For some children, the work undertaken during pre-proceedings improves their safety and so avoids the need for court proceedings, but a small number remain in pre-proceedings for too long without their circumstances improving.
15. Children in private fostering arrangements are appropriately assessed and supported, although there are delays in this being done for some children. Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are appropriately assessed and given important information, including their option to become looked after.
16. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service has significantly improved since the last inspection. The LADO ensures that when there are concerns about adults who work with children, children's experiences are central to their decision-making and they invest time and energy in ensuring all relevant strands are considered and people are involved as needed. When cases conclude, and if it is appropriate, children are sent personalised letters to tell them how well they did in raising their concerns and how important it is to tell people in future if they are worried. This service delivers a lot of training across a range of agencies and organisations and has built effective working relationships across the partnership.
17. Vulnerable children at risk of exploitation are supported by social workers who are attuned to risks of child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation. Social workers make full use of specialist and partner agencies to provide effective support. Plans fully recognise the importance of children being able to work with adults they trust. For some children, specialist support has significantly reduced risks.
18. Children who go missing from home are subject to well-coordinated planning to mitigate risk. However, they are not always offered return home interviews or sufficiently encouraged to engage with them. This can lead to missed opportunities to gather information about safeguarding concerns.
19. There is a strong and creative offer to young carers in Leicester City. Much positive work is delivered through the young carer groups, including activities, and young carer passports provide children with support, fun and access to sport and cultural activities, as well as developing their skills.
20. There has been a significant increase in the number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) in the Leicester City area, most notably in the secondary phase. While leaders are knowledgeable about the most vulnerable children and young people who are EHE, systems and procedures do not always help the EHE team to have close enough oversight of this group.

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

21. There is an effective multidisciplinary service in place to support children on the edge of care to remain living at home whenever possible. Through this service, parents benefit from a wide range of therapeutic support. Similarly, an impressive multidisciplinary team provides support to promote the stability of children in care as well as children who have been adopted or live with special guardians. Most children in care live in stable homes with carers who help to meet their needs.
22. When children do come into care, this is the right decision for them. When children are unable to remain with their parents or wider family, adoption or fostering to adopt for younger children are actively pursued. Many children are also supported to leave care to live under special guardianship orders (SGO).
23. Leicester City Council has taken the decision to use the term 'children seeking safety' for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. When these children arrive in Leicester, appropriate arrangements are made for them, including identifying age-appropriate suitable homes, and ensuring that their health and education needs are provided for. The trauma that children have experienced is recognised. For these children, their interests and access to education are promoted.
24. Disabled children benefit from stable placements which meet their needs well and provide long-term stability. Clear early planning for transition to adult services takes place, which ensures minimal disruption.
25. Although visits and support are provided, not all children who are placed at distance from Leicester City have an up-to-date health assessment. This means the authority and partners cannot be assured children's physical and emotional well-being needs are being met.
26. The quality of children's plans is variable. Stronger plans are detailed, taking careful account of children's wishes and feelings, reflecting their religious and cultural needs. Weaker plans lack this level of detail and specificity.
27. Personal education plans are often of a good quality. The views of children in care are actively sought and considered. Targets on personal education plans are not, however, explicit enough to clarify the actions needed to achieve the desired result, and sometimes lack ambition for children.
28. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) escalate concerns appropriately, although the impact of escalation is not always effective and timely. IROs seek to engage children in their reviews, however, high caseloads impact on their oversight and ability to advocate for children.

29. Most children in care have not had an opportunity to explore their histories through life-story work. While this is regularly raised in review meetings, it is not always followed up. This is a missed opportunity for children to understand their own lived experiences.
30. Most children in care are living locally in homes which are appropriate to their cultural and ethnic identity. A small number of children have been or are living in unregistered children's homes. These placements are only made in emergencies when no suitable option is available. Placement searches continue and children are moved to more appropriate homes as soon as this is possible. However, during their time in unregistered homes, some of these children are not being visited by their social workers or receiving IRO oversight commensurate with their potential vulnerability.
31. The fostering service has areas of significant strength. There is a commitment to achieving permanence for children where possible. Carers receive very good support, which promotes stability and consistency of care for children. However, the oversight of foster homes is not always sufficiently thorough, meaning that early opportunities to identify and address concerns about children's care can be missed. When care arrangements appear vulnerable to disruption, effective action is taken to strengthen placement support.
32. Leicester is part of an established and highly collaborative regional adoption agency (Family Adoption Links). Good practice is shared across participating services, which ensures ongoing development and innovation. Adoption practice is driven by managers and practitioners who are highly invested in their work. This leads to good outcomes for children and adopters.

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

33. In Leicester, personal advisers are called leaving care advisers (LCA). Young people usually have the opportunity to get to know their LCA before they leave care. This provides LCAs with the opportunity to understand children's whole history and build a relationship with them. LCAs attend key meetings about children or carry out joint visits with social workers before children leave care, to help to build their relationships.
34. The local authority is in touch with most care leavers. Stability in the care leavers team means that LCAs have enduring relationships with the young people they work with, some for five years or more. This means young people know who to contact when they need advice and they do so readily. Care leavers spoken to valued the relationships they have with their LCAs.
35. When young people say they do not want support, this is sometimes too easily and readily accepted, without persistence to provide the support they may need. While based on a well-intentioned desire to recognise an adult's right to

self-determination, this approach can lead to risks to more vulnerable care leavers not being identified or adequately addressed.

36. LCAs understand the importance of family and friends and the need for long-term relationships for care-experienced young people and support them to develop and maintain these. They also help young people secure accommodation in their home community, which helps them to maintain social relationships.
37. Most care leavers are in suitable accommodation and care leavers said that they like where they live and feel safe there. When care leavers are homeless, they are appropriately supported to find temporary, and then more permanent, accommodation. A very small number of care leavers living away from Leicester, who are vulnerable because of their histories and specific needs, are not adequately supported to find accommodation when they are at risk of becoming homeless. This means the local authority cannot be assured that they have somewhere suitable to live.
38. Care leavers are supported to register with a GP and dentist. When young people have emotional or mental health needs, LCAs usually help them to secure support from relevant agencies and professionals. This means that young people generally have their health needs met. While health histories are created for some young people when they leave care, they are not consistently provided to all care leavers, and some do not know they can access this information.
39. Leaders recognise that the care leaver offer needs to be enhanced and work is under way to achieve this. For example, young people living outside Leicester do not benefit from council tax exemption, and access to Wi-Fi, a key requirement for most activities, is not explicit in the offer. LCAs are not always clear about what the local offer is, and pathway plans contain out-of-date information about the offer. This means that young people will not be clear about all their entitlements and may miss out on them.
40. When care leavers are parents, they receive support and guidance from their LCAs to help them parent their children. This includes accompanying them to meetings about their children, together with practical support, such as moving home or getting their washing done.
41. Care leavers in custody receive a variable level of support. Some young people have not had a face-to-face visit from their LCA for a number of years while they have been in custody. The reason given is that they decline a visit, but there is little evidence that they have been encouraged to accept a visit.
42. Most care leavers in custody have very brief pathway plans that leave most actions to the prison service or family members. LCAs do not pull those actions together into a cohesive plan, instead noting that others are doing things. As a result, LCAs do not always show drive and ambition to ensure that those care

leavers in custody have their health, education or other needs met. Sometimes it is not clear how young people in custody are being helped to prepare for release.

43. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, the planning and support provided to them is not always sufficiently ambitious. Their plans do not clearly or sufficiently set out what steps need to be taken and by whom to bring some structure and meaningful activity to their lives. Young people are well supported to attend university, and there are apprenticeships available within the local authority, which are greatly valued by care leavers who take up these opportunities.
44. The quality of pathway plans is highly variable. Some pathway plans demonstrate a strong understanding of the young person's views and needs and are very specific and detailed about how the young person will achieve their ambitions. Other written plans lack detail and do not reflect the range of work being undertaken to support the young person. When circumstances change for a young person, pathway plans are not updated to reflect the meaningful change in circumstances.
45. When care leavers over 21 approach the service for help, they are quickly reallocated to an LCA and usually supported with the presenting concern or worry.

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

46. The last 18 months have seen significant change in the leadership team for children's services in Leicester. These have taken place in a challenging financial climate and the context of complex need in the city. Corporate commitment to children's services has been sustained and leaders have strived to maintain a supportive environment for workers. However, they currently lack a comprehensive understanding of the quality and consistency of frontline practice and its management.
47. External partners, including Cafcass (children and family court advisory and support service) and the designated family judge, say they have confidence in decision-making, and schools appreciate the advice they get from well-trained professionals through the front door services.
48. There has been improvement in some areas identified at the last Ofsted judgment inspection in October 2021 as needing to improve. The co-location and integration of early help provision has improved access to this tier of effective support. Leaders are taking a planned approach to implementing changes, in line with the government's children's social care reform opportunities.

49. Managers in all tiers of the organisation are not consistently maintaining a tight enough oversight and grip to ensure that effective timely support is provided to children and care leavers.
50. Leaders have managed to maintain relative stability for children in their care and are acutely aware of the challenge to identify sufficient placements to meet children's needs. However, the frequency of visits and monitoring activity for the small number of children living in unregistered children's homes do not provide adequate assurance about the care that they receive. Leaders know that, as corporate parents, they need to do more work and have, for example, concrete plans to enhance the local offer for care leavers.
51. Frontline practitioners in Leicester City have access to a relevant and extensive range of learning and development opportunities. Training is delivered through easy-access bite-size sessions and more comprehensive training is also helping workers to improve the support they provide.
52. Leaders have responded to recommendations from recent local safeguarding practice reviews, delivering training across the workforce to develop skills and knowledge in areas which have been identified as requiring greater knowledge and understanding, including child sexual abuse.
53. Leaders are rightly proud of the multidisciplinary specialist teams that have been created to support children with a range of complex needs and their families and carers, including where there is a risk of entry to care or care arrangements breaking down. Children, families and carers are supported by skilled therapists to address and manage historical trauma. This is helping children.
54. Performance management arrangements are not consistently underpinned by accurate and up-to-date information. For example, data in relation to initial contacts at the front door or to measure the timeliness of response to children identified as living in private fostering arrangements is not accurate. This means leaders do not have a sufficiently precise understanding of the volume and pace of service responses to children.
55. The quality and impact of frontline management oversight and supervision are not consistently strong enough to ensure that children receive the right support at the right pace to help keep them safer and improve their experiences. A culture of 'high support' from managers is not backed up by 'high challenge' to consistently improve the impact of support that is provided to children and care leavers. Supervision records are often very brief and do not show sufficient tracking of children's progress.
56. The recruitment and retention of frontline practitioners remains an appropriate focus of activity for leaders in the city. A range of workforce supply routes, including apprenticeships, Frontline and ASYE recruitment are being used, alongside a focus on enabling staff to progress their careers through promotion.

The local authority has suitably ambitious plans to further strengthen its workforce offer, through, for example, an enhanced academy for learning and development.

57. Frontline practitioners like working in Leicester City and inspectors met long-standing members of staff as well as staff who have returned to the city after working elsewhere. Practitioners value the level of support they receive and their access to a broad range of training and development opportunities.

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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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