

Lancashire County Council

Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

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Children’s services in Lancashire require improvement to be good	
1. Children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance	Requires improvement

Executive summary

From a very slow start, the past six months in Lancashire have seen a much-needed injection of pace, with a renewed energy and focus. Leaders can now demonstrate that they know their services well. This insight has led to some significant improvements and, as a result, children's services are no longer inadequate. An effective corporate leadership structure is now in place and a new post of executive director of education and children's services has been created. At the time of the inspection, the current interim post-holder was well supported by a new interim post of deputy director. Senior leaders now fully understand the scale of the improvements that are required and have taken appropriate action, which has seen services for children improve. Senior managers and leaders have taken on board the feedback from Ofsted monitoring visits, their peers and commissioned improvement partners to ensure that change is informed by best practice and previous inspection recommendations. The independently chaired improvement board is focused on scrutinising developments through a revised improvement plan, and this is resulting in improvements for children across a large and diverse county.

Recent significant investment in redesign of structures and in additional staff across key teams have led to improvements in services for children. Aspects of the service which have been improved include the new arrangements in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the implementation of a placement finding team and developments for children on the edge of care. Social work capacity at the front door has also been strengthened, and there has been a change from generic to specialist teams on a new locality model.

This improvement is supported by an increased focus on quality assurance, which includes an effective, reliable and independently moderated auditing framework. Key learning from audits is disseminated across the workforce by a team of 12 advanced practitioners, who are deployed to support the improvement agenda. This work includes delivery of 'purposeful practice' workshops, reflective group supervision, and practice-focused 'drop in' clinics.

An effective workforce strategy is addressing retention rates and reducing the reliance on agency staff. There is evidence of an increasingly stable workforce. This has led to more social workers developing stable relationships with children and understanding their needs well. The ambition to develop into a learning organisation is tangible, with progress made in relation to the improved offer to newly qualified social workers, the Social Work Academy and the recently developed Leadership Academy.

However, senior managers are under no illusion about the rate of progress to date. There is still inconsistent practice across the service and more needs to be done to embed recent developments. The response to risk is mostly recognised, proportionate and helpful to children. Thresholds are generally understood and applied appropriately. However, the cultural shift from compliance with statutory requirements to achieving a consistent quality of practice is yet to be completed. The model of practice is not sufficiently strength-based, and this impacts on the quality of assessments, plans and case recording for some children. There is also drift and delay for some children.

Effective multi-agency early help services are not sufficiently embedded. Arrangements are not strong enough to ensure that all children who require statutory services are stepped up from early help swiftly. The local authority's response to children in need is much more robust than it was at the time of the last inspection. A more focused response to neglect is still required to ensure that children receive consistently effective child in need support.

Monitoring systems to track permanence for children looked after have recently been reviewed and refreshed. However, these are not efficiently reducing unnecessary delay for a small number of children. The adoption service has evolved into a centralised, responsive and supportive team, which has consistently delivered a good standard of work.

The response to care leavers is now much more focused and supportive than it was at the time of the last inspection. Almost all care leavers are in touch with their personal advisers and are living in suitable accommodation. However, services for all care leavers are not consistently timely, accessible and responsive to their individual needs.

The council is a committed and responsible corporate parent, and there have been significant efforts made to engage with children to secure their full participation in their reviews. However, independent reviewing officers (IROs) do not ensure that the individual needs of all children are fully addressed and that their plans are consistently child-focused.

Despite increasing numbers, children looked after are seen regularly, placement finding processes lead to the majority of children being placed within Lancashire, and placement stability is better than comparators. Significant progress has been made to improve the educational attainment and progress of children looked after at Key Stages 1 and 2. More work is required in supporting children at Key Stage 4.

Further commissioning work is required to increase the range of targeted and preventive domestic abuse services on offer.

The quality of performance data has improved but is not used effectively by all managers to understand practice across the county.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates 14 children's homes. Eleven were judged to be good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspection. However, one children's home was subject to a suspension notice during this inspection.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in September 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - Overall effectiveness: Inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: Inadequate
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: Requires improvement
 - adoption performance: Requires improvement
 - experiences and progress of care leavers: Inadequate
 - Leadership, management and governance: Inadequate.

Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since February 2017. The interim executive director of education and children's services has been in post since January 2018 and took responsibility for the statutory role of DCS from the director of children's services in March 2018
- The interim chief executive has been in post since January 2018.
- The local authority uses the risk sensible model of social work.

¹ The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 246,600 children and young people under the age of 18 live in Lancashire. This is 20.6% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 15.4% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 13.8% (the national average is 14.1%)
 - in secondary schools is 12.2% (the national average is 12.9%).
- Children and young people who are White British account for 87.3% of all children living in the area, compared with 86% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian (9.7%) and Mixed (2.5%).
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 13.4% (the national average is 20.6%)
 - in secondary schools is 8.9% (the national average is 16.2%).

Child protection in this area

- At 31 May 2018, 1,699 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 1,815 at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 May 2018, 1,212 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is a reduction from 1,394 at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 March 2018, 31 children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is an increase from 22 at 31 March 2017.
- Since the last inspection, 49 serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and 12 serious case reviews have been completed or were ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 May 2018, 1,986 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 80.5 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 1,864 (75.9 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
 - 402 (20.2%) live outside the local authority area
 - 192 live in residential children's homes, of whom 37.5% live outside the authority area

- six live in residential special schools², all of whom live outside the authority area
 - 1,168 live with foster families, of whom 18.7% live outside the authority area
 - 372 live with parents, of whom 10.2% live outside the authority area
 - 25 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
- there have been 90 adoptions
 - 138 children became subject of special guardianship orders
 - 678 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 4.3% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 255 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - no children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

² These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

Recommendations

1. Work with partners to ensure that an effective range of early help services is in place to support children and families when they first need help.
2. Ensure that assessments clearly articulate risks and protective factors, provide robust analysis and spell out what needs to change and how that is likely to be achieved.
3. Ensure that all plans for children in need, children subject to child protection plans, looked after children and care leavers are specific, measurable and outcome-focused, so that parents, young people and professionals know who needs to do what, and by when.
4. Ensure that the quality of critical challenge provided by first line managers, IROs in looked after reviews and conference chairs within child protection conferences are effective in avoiding drift or delay.
5. Ensure that the local authority and partners share a common understanding of the risks associated with neglect, in all its different forms, and have the tools they need to monitor and measure their impact in managing change.
6. Improve the educational attainment and progress of children looked after at Key Stage 4.
7. Ensure that permanence planning, including for those children who return home, is rigorously monitored and reviewed on a consistent basis across the county to reduce the likelihood of drift and delay.
8. Ensure that when children successfully return home, timely revocation hearings are held to secure permanence plans for them to remain in the care of their parents.
9. Ensure that all care leavers receive timely and accessible support that meets their financial, educational and emotional health needs.
10. Improve the use of performance data so that it is an effective tool to help managers measure progress and examine trends.
11. Work with partners to ensure that responses for children and families living with domestic abuse are focused on delivering effective, preventative, and targeted support.

Summary for children and young people

- Children who need help and protection in Lancashire now get better support to keep them safe. Senior managers and people who run the council have started to do a much better job. They now have accurate information about how services are doing, so they can concentrate on improving the right things.
- Social workers usually understand important things that have happened to children in the past. They try to make sure that they talk to all the people who have important information. This is helping them to decide what the best thing to do is.
- Senior managers are now making sure that staff have the training they need to do their job well.
- Young people who are looked after are getting much better help with their education or job prospects, both while they are at school and after they reach 16. More children in primary schools are doing well. Children and young people at secondary school are still not being supported enough to achieve well in school. More young people are staying in education or getting an apprenticeship at 16.
- Most children looked after live in homes with people who understand and meet their needs well.
- Care leavers feel that the local authority is getting better at being a corporate parent to them. They receive more information to help them be successful in their adult lives. More care leavers are continuing to live with their foster carers in staying put arrangements.
- Work to help children understand what has happened to them before they become looked after needs to start earlier.
- Children are successfully adopted according to their needs, although sometimes it takes too long to decide that adoption is the best plan for them. Adopted children receive good support that helps them when they move to live with their new adoptive families.
- The council is interested in what children have to say. They involve children in important decisions about how services are run. Care leavers now go to the corporate parenting board meetings and they are helping to improve services.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Requires improvement

Summary

The local authority has acted on key recommendations made at the time of the 2015 Ofsted inspection. In most cases, prompt and effective action is taken to safeguard and protect children, particularly those at immediate risk of significant harm. Better use is being made of strategy discussions to plan and consider the threshold for child protection investigations. The way in which help and support is delivered to children in need is no longer a cause for concern.

In the majority of cases seen by inspectors, children and families are helped and protected at the right level by suitably qualified staff. There is a much more joined-up approach to supporting children who go missing from home, care or school and those who are at risk of exploitation. Arrangements to safeguard and protect young people at risk of being radicalised are good. Allegations against people who work with children and who are in a position of trust are well managed and rigorously investigated. The needs of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are carefully assessed and this results in appropriate packages of care, accommodation and support.

However, senior managers and leaders recognise that the quality of practice is still too variable and that the help and protection that many children and families receive requires improvement. For example, while the continuum of need has been revised and updated, partners are not fully on board with the common assessment framework. The new children and family well-being service (CFWS) is not fully embedded. Screening of contacts and referrals that come through the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) sometimes takes longer than 24 hours to progress, resulting in delays for some children.

While most assessments are timely, detailed and routinely updated, the quality of analysis provided is not consistently sharp. Social workers are generally better at describing the issues than spelling out what needs to change and how this will be achieved. As a result, very few plans are genuinely specific, measurable, realistic and time bound. Allied to the fact that managers and child protection conference chairs are not consistently providing robust and effective challenge, this sometimes undermines the effectiveness of the help and protection provided. On occasions, this is contributing to drift and delay for a small number of children.

The model of practice does not include a range of tools to support social workers and other professionals to do their job, specifically in relation to neglect. The local authority and its partners are struggling to get to grips with the size and scale of the challenge of domestic abuse across the county.

Inspection findings

12. The local authority and partners are not yet delivering comprehensive and effective early help to all children. The basic building blocks are in place. Partnerships with health visitors, midwives and police early action teams are well developed. The curriculum framework has been well thought out in order to ensure that an extensive programme is targeted and delivered to best effect. However, there is currently a high number of unfilled family support worker posts which are subject to ongoing recruitment processes. This means that the service is overstretched at this time.
13. Currently, due to demand and capacity issues, the children and families well-being service (CFWS) is having to prioritise children and families who are stepped down from children's social care at the expense of other children and families who would benefit from early help. This is, in part, because most cases with a CWFS worker involved have this worker as the lead professional, rather than partners appropriately being identified to take on this role. This has implications for the capacity of the service. It also means that children and families do not always get the help and support they need quickly enough when problems first start to emerge. Action is being taken to try to improve the quality of common assessments (CAFs), as there are significant variations across, and between, districts and partner agencies.
(Recommendation)
14. The interface between early help and statutory social work is clearly differentiated. Step-down arrangements are generally well managed. The continuum of need has been revised and updated, and there is evidence that Lancashire's model of practice is being used more widely. However, further work is required to ensure that partners fully understand, and consistently apply, thresholds. Additionally, when cases are stepped back up from CFWS to children's social care, it happens via the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). This means that children and families often have to start again with a new social worker.
15. The giving, or withholding, of consent is clearly recorded. However, in a very small number of cases, inspectors found that the local authority could, and should, have been more authoritative in over-ruling consent in the best interests of the child, resulting in a swifter response for more children.
16. Most cases seen in the MASH are progressed appropriately as referrals to children's social care, re-directed to early help or stepped down to universal services appropriately. There is, though, room for further improvement. Screening and triage of contacts and referrals leads to actions that are rated according to red, amber or green (RAG-rated) being overseen by managers. Despite this, some still take longer than 24 hours to progress. Consequently,

inspectors also saw some isolated examples of drift and delay within the MASH.

17. Good two-way communication with the out-of-hours social work service (EDT), which is co-located with the MASH, helps to ensure that children and families receive an effective service out of hours.
18. Children considered to be at immediate risk of significant harm following referral are referred swiftly to the relevant locality team. Good use is made of conference calls to facilitate the engagement and involvement of partner agencies in strategy discussions. Most, but not all, strategy discussions are held promptly. Information is well shared. In most cases, good account is taken of historical factors. However, the way in which some strategy discussions are recorded, particularly those that take place out of hours, requires improvement to make it clear who will do what, by when and why.
19. Most assessments are timely. Social workers know their children well, although this is not always sufficiently reflected on the case record. For example, children's individual needs, wishes, personalities and feelings are generally reflected in social work assessments. They routinely include lots of detail and are updated in response to changing circumstances. The needs of disabled children are recognised. However, they tend towards the descriptive and, in most cases, the quality of analysis provided requires improvement. Protective factors are not routinely identified. Assessments are not good at spelling out what needs to change and how that is likely to be achieved. (Recommendation)
20. The quality of plans requires improvement. Very few plans are genuinely specific, measurable, realistic and time bound. This has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of the help and support provided and makes it difficult for parents, and others, to understand who needs to do what, by when, or to hold each other to account. (Recommendation)
21. Attendance by partner agencies and other professionals at child protection conferences and core groups is generally good. Although core groups meet regularly, progress is not always systematically reviewed and evaluated against decisions taken and actions agreed previously. On occasion, this leads to drift and delay.
22. Child protection conference chairs and practice managers are not consistently providing effective critical challenge. This is clear from the quality of assessments and plans. Inspectors also found it to be an issue sometimes when there is evidence of disguised compliance and/or parents are reluctant to engage. In a very small number of cases, inspectors saw evidence of professionals not always robustly focusing on the impact on the child.
23. Family support workers now appropriately hold children in need cases when the level of associated risk is judged to be low, and then only under the close supervision of a senior social worker. More complex cases are directly

managed by social workers. Children in need plans seen are mostly effective. Children in need cases are stepped up or down appropriately in response to increasing or decreasing risks and needs.

24. Currently, social workers and other professionals do not have access to a range of tools, including those for analysis of neglect, to help them to monitor and measure progress, or to support direct work with children and parents. Although there is good awareness of the significance and impact of domestic abuse, substance misuse and parental mental ill-health in the lives of children and families, the neglect strategy is out of date. Implementation of the existing delivery plan has stalled, and this has led to a lack of purposeful practice in this area with partners. (Recommendation)
25. Changes in the MASH have encouraged the local authority and partners to focus on, and strengthen, their response to domestic abuse. They are still trying to get to grips with the size and scale of the challenge. The quality and timeliness of police vulnerable people reports is improving. Most include relevant historical information, are appropriately rated as red, amber or green (RAG) and lead to an effective and proportionate response. Information about domestic abuse incidents is now appropriately shared with schools, school nurses, health visitors and midwives. This helps to safeguard children and families who do not meet the threshold for a child protection investigation.
26. Audits are used to assess the quality of responses to children living with domestic abuse. A number of commissioned services provide early support to children and young people. Lancashire victim services also provide a range of services, including the adult victim service. The county has nine refuges. However, the perpetrator programme is under-resourced and under-developed.
27. The multi-agency response to adults who pose a risk to children (MARAC) arrangements are well established and well managed. Decisions taken, and action agreed about children at MARAC meetings, are systematically followed up. There are good links between the MARAC and the multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs). However, the sheer volume of referrals, which means that several of the 13 MARACs across the county are having to meet more than once a month, has prompted an urgent review.
28. The local authority and partners have acted decisively to strengthen their collective response to children who go missing, child exploitation and child trafficking. It is too soon to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the three new multi-agency exploitation teams, one in each locality. However, inspectors saw positive examples of risks being identified and managed appropriately. Children and young people, including children looked after, are being safeguarded and protected effectively. Robust action is also being taken to disrupt the activity of perpetrators. Good awareness of female genital mutilation, so called honour-based violence, and forced marriage

leads to prompt and robust action as soon as issues and concerns are first identified.

29. Monthly multi-agency missing panels, although relatively new, consider the most high-risk children appropriately. A new missing from home coordinator post in the MASH has been created to coordinate an effective response. When children go missing from home or care, the majority are promptly offered return home interviews. The quality of return home interviews completed by dedicated workers in the exploitation teams is generally of a good standard, with information being used effectively to safeguard and protect children and young people.
30. Effective arrangements are in place to try to ensure that no child who is missing education, or who is being home educated, falls through the net. The multi-agency children missing education panel provides effective oversight, ensuring prompt and appropriate action. The local authority has a tight handle on alternative education provision. Effective action is being taken to reduce permanent exclusions. The number of electively home educated children is falling (from 1500 to 1300 this year).
31. Clear and well-understood referral pathways and effective channel panel arrangements mean that children and young people who are at risk of being radicalised are identified and appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect them.
32. There is good buy-in by all partners to the Lancashire homeless protocol, which means that the needs of 16- and 17-year olds who present as homeless are carefully assessed. In the majority of cases, this results in appropriate packages of care, accommodation and support.
33. The health and well-being of the 24 children who have been identified as living in private fostering arrangements at the time of the inspection are regularly and suitably monitored by a dedicated worker.
34. Allegations against people who work with children who are in a position of trust are well managed and rigorously investigated. Staff capacity has tripled from one to three designated officers, which has led to increased oversight and tracking of all cases.
35. The local authority does not yet have a systematic way of capturing feedback from children and families about their experiences of help and protection. This limits their influence on the design, development and delivery of services. The availability of independent advocacy support for children and families involved in child protection procedures is too low.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement

Summary

Services for children looked after have improved since the last inspection due to a number of recent developments. The formation of dedicated teams means that frontline social work practice is more child-focused in terms of engagement with children looked after by social workers who have manageable workloads and know their children well.

Senior managers now convene regular and routine panels to make decisions about when children become looked after, and an outreach resource is available to prevent children coming into care. However, neither development is embedded across the county and there is not a consistent approach to pre-proceedings work.

Effective partnership arrangements for the delivery of health assessments and plans are in place. Children’s educational outcomes are improving, although issues remain for teenagers. Effective systems for finding suitable care placements are now firmly in place and work well for most children. Measures are being taken to track and streamline planning for permanence, although these are not fully embedded.

Effective placement finding has resulted in a very high number of children looked after living within the county, and this contributes positively to improved placement stability. Additional capacity within the IRO service is promoting greater compliance with statutory guidance for children. However, IROs are not sufficiently focused on the quality of casework. The quality of written assessments and care planning for children looked after does not do justice to the depth of social workers’ knowledge of their needs. As a result, the needs of some children looked after are not clearly stated in their plans, which can sometimes lead to a lack of clarity about what needs to happen. Participation and engagement of children in the processes underpinning their care experience is positively encouraged and supported.

Recruitment of foster carers and connected carers is effectively completed by well-managed panels, and support for carers is strong and highly valued by them. The adoption service is a strength, and there are robust arrangements in place for timely approval and post-adoption support.

Services for care leavers have improved and are now compliant with statutory guidance, although they would be further enhanced by ensuring that all care leavers receive a consistent offer.

Inspection findings

36. The development of specialist teams for children looked after and the recruitment of a dedicated workforce have resulted in manageable workloads for social workers, who visit children regularly and get to know them well. Social workers can clearly describe the lived experiences of children looked after, who they frequently visit more often than the statutory minimum.
37. The outreach service is enhancing the offer of help for young people on the edge of care, with plans to open an adolescent support unit imminently. This will offer outreach and respite support to the most vulnerable families. Although their role is not fully visible across the service, outreach teams have improved the outcomes for a large and growing number of young people.
38. Social work for families that takes place pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline is not of a consistent quality, or completed to a standard format, and this can sometimes result in delays, initiating court proceedings.
39. The current practice of senior management oversight for children becoming looked after is based on a tried and tested panel system, but is not consistently implemented across the county. When children become looked after at the request of their parents, using Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, the rationale for this is not always clear. It can be difficult to establish from a child's written record why they are looked after, and what the care episode is expected to achieve.
40. Most children who become looked after are well matched with a suitable placement in the short term because of a well-integrated system of placement finding. The co-location of the family placement finder with the dedicated access to resources team means that social workers can be offered the option of two or more potential placements. High numbers of children looked after are placed in the Lancashire area and very few are placed outside of the county. This means that they can become looked after and retain their school placement, health arrangements and friendship groups. This positive feature contributes significantly to improved placement stability and sustainability for most children.
41. Senior managers have used performance management effectively to understand sufficiency issues in relation to the complex needs of challenging young people, including those at risk of exploitation, and the impact of this on placement stability. A well-defined reconfiguration plan is currently being implemented, but it is too soon for it to show impact. When children return home to their families, the management decision-making is not always clearly recorded and the quality of written agreements with parents is inconsistent. It is not always clear to parents what they need to do to resume legal, as well as physical, care of their children.

42. Senior managers have recently undertaken an exercise to review a legacy of cases of children who are looked after and placed with parents when the care order could potentially be revoked. The exercise has effectively reduced the comparatively high numbers of children looked after in the county. However, due to issues within the discharge and revocation process, there is a backlog of cases. This means that there is a high number of cases of children identified for revocation which has not resulted in timely revocation hearings. As a result, plans to meet some children's needs are drifting.
(Recommendation)
43. Due to a number of new posts being established in the IRO service, IROs now have manageable workloads. This means that they get to know children and regularly keep in touch with them in between reviews. IROs generally ensure that there is compliance with statutory guidance, and a well-understood escalation policy is frequently used to alert managers to any lapses. However, IROs are not challenging drift and delay in securing permanence with sufficient rigour. IROs are not doing enough to challenge the quality of written recording and to ensure that a viable, aspirational care plan exists for each child looked after. (Recommendation)
44. Children's voices come through clearly from social workers' case notes. This mirrors the commitment of the county's corporate parenting board to engage meaningfully with the children in care council, known as LINX. This is a well organised, vocal and visible group of young people whose voices are heard and listened to. Many children participate in their reviews and use of the social media communication app MOMO has increased, which ensures that IROs receive regular updates on children's views prior to their review meetings. The achievements of children looked after are celebrated at the PROUD awards on an annual basis.
45. Children in care are actively engaged in staff recruitment and provide input to the recruitment of foster carers, while delivering sessions at foster care training. Twenty-one members of LINX have been trained as young inspectors and undertake inspections of placement providers.
46. Children have access to independent advocacy, although the number of advocates and independent visitors is disproportionately small compared to the size of the looked after population. Advocacy caseloads are too high, and this limits the ability of the service to reach out effectively to all children looked after.
47. Updated assessments are routinely carried out. The needs of children looked after are appropriately reassessed when there is a planned change to their care plan. Most children have a current assessment on file, although these generally lack insightful analysis, and this does not reflect social workers' in-depth knowledge of the children on their caseloads

48. Care plans are too brief or sometimes lack aspiration for children by failing to set ambitious targets for their progress in care. Placement plans are rarely written to include sufficient detail, and most do not help carers to understand what they need to do to promote the welfare of children placed in their care.
49. The local authority acknowledges that planning for children's permanence is not consistently strong enough, except when they have a plan for adoption. Permanence is not always considered at the child's second statutory review. Some plans for permanence are vague and are not always fully understood by children or their carers. Work to prepare children for permanence and to help them understand their life histories is not always undertaken as planned. Decisions that children will stay where they are living on a permanent basis are not always formally ratified. This means that children sometimes drift into long-term arrangements, and this creates confusion and uncertainty for them.
50. The system for monitoring the progress of a wide range of permanence plans for children is not strong enough and does not consistently match the rigour that is generally applied to tracking plans for adoption. The role of the case progression manager is to provide support and direction for social workers and has begun to apply some consistency to practice. The local authority's permanence panel is not fully functioning as intended. Plans to introduce placement stability meetings when there is a risk of an unplanned ending are not fully implemented. The local authority has created a permanence tracker, but it is not operational. (Recommendation)
51. Improvements in partnership working with dedicated health professionals have increased the numbers of children receiving initial health assessments and have improved the effectiveness of health action plans. Children becoming looked after are often already in receipt of a service from child and adolescent mental health services, and this can be maintained or extended to support their emotional well-being in care. Children looked after also have additional access to the county's own team of specialist professionals to support improvement in their mental health. This team is called supporting carers and young people together (SCAYT+).
52. Many key stage 1 and 2 children looked after are making good progress from their starting points and their outcomes compare well with national averages. Attendance and good behaviour rates are high, with very few temporary, and no permanent, exclusions. Alternatively, too many young people at key stage 4 do not make good progress. Attendance and behaviour issues remain serious challenges. Only a very small number of children gained five GCSEs at grade 9 to 4, including for English and mathematics. (Recommendation)
53. The virtual school team has been strengthened, with key posts for early years, post-16 and looked after children who live out of county. Close tracking of children's progress, attendance and emotional well-being is resulting in earlier identification of additional support or intervention needs. Additional funding is used well to ensure that there is appropriate support in schools.

Although most children and young people now have an up-to-date personal education plan, too many of these plans do not reflect the level and quality of information and planning needed to support children.

54. Foster carers are well supported by their supervising social workers and feel highly valued by the local authority. They have good access to a wide range of training that is relevant to the needs of the children who they are looking after. Children routinely receive child-friendly welcome packs prior to living with their new foster carers, which ensures that they have a good level of information about the foster family to help them make the transition to their new home. Foster carers' reviews are thorough, and are sharply focused on improvement and learning. There has been investment in a dedicated IRO post for foster carer reviews. Carers are empowered to make appropriate day-to-day decisions on behalf of children looked after.
55. Carefully targeted recruitment has led to an overall increase in the pool of available foster carers. The quality of the assessments of connected person carers and special guardians, and the support they receive, is generally good, although, in a small number of cases, the specific support available to special guardians is not clearly recorded. The local authority's fostering and adoption panels are well managed, suitably challenging and carry out their core functions well. The panel is not using its wider quality assurance role to help improve practice in relation to the quality of assessments and plans across the service.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is Good

56. The local authority demonstrates an increasingly strong commitment to considering adoption for children when they cannot remain living within their birth families. The numbers of children adopted from care compares favourably with similar local authorities. This commitment to adoption extends whenever possible to older children, groups of brothers and sisters, and children with additional needs.
57. Overall, children move promptly to live with their prospective adopters. Performance is improving and is now close to national targets. Sometimes, there is justifiable delay to ensure good outcomes for children, typically due to the specific, complex needs of individual children, or to allow brothers and sisters to stay together. Decisions to change plans away from adoption and the subsequent revocations of placement orders are timely and appropriate.
58. There is, however, still unnecessary delay for a small number of children. This is more likely to occur at the early stage of permanence planning caused by, for example, the slow transfer of case responsibility from a locality team to

the centralised children awaiting adoption team. Occasionally, there are delays in submitting court applications or adoption panel papers. In a very small number of cases, work to prepare children for adoption does not begin soon enough.

59. The successful use of concurrent planning and fostering for adoption has led to swift, positive outcomes for a growing number of children each year who, as a result, experience minimal disruption before moving to live with their adopters. In 2017/18, 28 such placements were made, compared to 19 in the previous year. An additional 15 early permanence carers were also recruited last year.
60. The careful, balanced exploration of these options with all potential adopters contributes to the overall high quality of assessments, and an increased insight into how the skills of applicants best meet the diverse needs of children who require adoption.
61. Activity to recruit adopters is inclusive, creative and focused on the identified needs of children in Lancashire. Recent ambitious recruitment targets have been exceeded. The recruitment and assessment team respond promptly and positively to a high volume of initial inquiries. Training for potential adopters is suitably challenging and is valued by those who attend, although the evaluation of the training is not sufficiently systematic or proactive to assist further improvement.
62. Prospective adopters benefit from good continuity of support from skilled and knowledgeable adoption social workers. The dynamic and sensitive assessment process helps potential adopters to reflect, learn and develop. They progress at a measured, but timely, pace through the stages of assessment. Adopters feel that their social workers get to know and understand them very well, offering a level of continuity and support that has led to good assessments and matches with children.
63. Prospective adopters' reports for panel are of a reliably good quality and reflect the quality of assessments. The comprehensive, relevant information in the reports leads to good analysis of applicants' strengths and vulnerabilities and promotes good decisions. The quality of children's permanence reports, as the local authority acknowledges, is not as consistently good. The weaker reports tend to rely on description at the expense of analysis. They are too often repetitive and difficult to read.
64. The service supports adopters to attend, and contribute, to the joint fostering and adoption panel meetings. Overall, the panel provides good oversight of the quality of adoption work and offers robust challenge when necessary. Panel records are concise and clear; the reasons for panel recommendations are well explained and the subsequent decisions are timely.
65. Family finding for children who may require adoption begins at an appropriately early stage. On the rare occasions that there are no suitable

adopters within the county that can meet the needs of the child, referrals are made appropriately and promptly to the National Adoption Register and Link Maker. Work to identify suitable adopters is consistently rigorous, creative and persistent (including, for example, good use of exchange days, where information is shared with other local authorities), further contributing to good matches for children. Disruptions prior to the adoption order being made are extremely rare and there have been no unplanned endings to pre-adoption placements in the last 12 months.

66. In all but a very small number of cases, children's moves from foster carers to their adoptive placement are managed very well. Skilled, committed foster carers are fully engaged in the plan and work well with adopters.
67. Adoption social workers' visits to adoption placements, including to those outside Lancashire, are regular and purposeful. Direct work to support children is well planned, suitably prioritised and effective. Life-story books are child-friendly, attractively presented and will help children understand their histories now or in the future. Adopters are encouraged and well supported to make good use of these materials.
68. At all different stages of the process, adopters are clear about the agreed plan for support that is available and are confident that it will be provided promptly and effectively. A wide range of accessible and effective post-adoption support is available, and support plans are based on robust needs assessments tailored effectively to individual circumstances and requirements.
69. In particular, adopters and children benefit from bespoke therapeutic support, often in consultation with, or directly involving, the supporting carers and young people together service (SCAYT). Extensive use is made of the adoption support fund. Adopters also welcome the support received through group activities, such as 'stay and play' sessions for younger children, regular social events, and support groups. Adoption support groups have input from partner agencies, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the virtual school head, which ensures that the emotional needs of children placed for adoption are responded to appropriately.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement

70. Care leavers have a positive and confident view of the local authority as a corporate parent. They appreciate the higher profile they now have and the wider range of methods that their personal advisers use to keep in touch with them. This enables care leavers to find out a range of information. The majority of care leavers have good relationships with their personal advisers, giving examples of effective support with matters such as housing or attending health appointments. However, the quality of services is not consistently good for all care leavers.
71. Most care leavers are clear about their entitlements through Youth Zone, a section of the council website. The leaving care grant has significantly increased, and council tax has been waived. However, financial procedures to give care leavers access to funds for housing deposits and home start-up costs are cumbersome and do not encourage the development of skills in making decisions and budgeting. Care leavers who live out of the county are particularly adversely affected by this.
72. The local authority is now in touch with the vast majority of care leavers. Almost all care leavers have a pathway plan, but too many of these plans do not contain an up-to-date reflection of their situation. Pathway plans are often still statements of each care leaver's situation rather than a key tool in planning their future. In one example, it was not possible to see how the young person had gained an apprenticeship with the authority, and in another, it was not possible to see how the young person had moved into independent housing. The quality of many plans require improvement to ensure that they are sharply focused on raising the aspirations and outcomes for care leavers. They also do not always include evidence-based analysis of each individual care leaver's strengths and areas for development in order for them to achieve independence. For example, there might not be analysis of the impact of a young person's complex emotional needs. As such, pathway plans are not always based on a thorough analysis of individual needs and strengths, nor do they contain effective timescales.
73. Although preparation for independence is improving, there are not enough care leavers being effectively encouraged to engage in the development of a programme to support and recognise skills for independence.
74. The profile of care leavers is much improved. Care leavers attend and have a presence at the corporate parenting board and scrutiny panel. They also deliver events about their experiences and are consulted about the development of a new offer to care leavers. Although some care leavers have been actively involved in creative projects such as 'Sincerely You', too few are being supported or encouraged to be actively involved in care leavers' groups. 'Sincerely You' was a good practice initiative that involved 60 care leavers

writing letters to their former selves to highlight the impact of the care experience on young people. These letters were exhibited around the county in public buildings and they are appropriately used in foster care training and within the social work academy to raise awareness.

75. The number of care leavers in suitable accommodation has risen to 91% (April 2018). The small number who are in unsuitable accommodation are nearly all in custody. The number of care leavers staying put with former foster carers has increased significantly to 54 and is above national averages. Improving housing options for care leavers is at the heart of current renegotiations with housing providers, in recognition of poor availability in some areas.
76. The local authority is now developing a much more strategic approach to engaging more young people in education and training, although this is still in the early stages of development. Increasing numbers of over-16s have a personal education plan. Almost all young people in care at age 16 were in education, employment and training in September 2017. At the time of inspection, two thirds of this group were still in education, employment or training. However, less than half of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are still in education, employment or training, which is too low. (Recommendation)
77. A dedicated employment support team for children looked after and care leavers (aged 14–25) works proactively with the leaving care service to support young people into education, employment or training. Sixteen care leavers are now employed as apprentices, with a number in the local authority, including several in innovative roles supporting the leaving care teams. Forty-eight care leavers are in higher education. Additional funding is being used well to support care leavers through help with transport costs, purchase of equipment and in supplementing very low wages. The recent pilot of NEET panels, forums for the range of professionals involved with a care leaver, is providing a useful approach to try to identify more effective strategies to re-engage young people.
78. Almost all care leavers have information about their health and know how to access services. All are registered with a doctor and most are registered with a dentist. There is too long a wait for appointments for CAMHS and too many occasions when a young person in serious need is denied a further appointment if they fail to attend. Different thresholds for access to adult mental health services means that too many young adults are not receiving the support they need in a timely way.

Leadership, management and governance

Requires improvement

Summary

Lancashire was slow to respond to the findings from the previous inspection. However, steps have now been taken to improve services for children and, as a result, services are no longer inadequate.

There has been a number of significant strategic leadership changes over the past months. These include a change in the chief executive, the appointment of an executive director of education and children’s services (DCS) and the creation of a new deputy DCS role. Although these are interim appointments, the transitions have been managed well and have contributed to the increased pace of change. Senior managers, the chief executive and political leaders are aware of, and are acting on, their respective responsibilities and the priorities for children’s services.

Strategic plans are now better aligned, and partnerships in key agencies are working more effectively. Commissioning arrangements across the local authority have improved since the time of the last inspection because they are now informed by more reliable business data and financial intelligence.

The workforce strategy is effective and well supported by corporate council services. There is now a better balance of newly qualified and experienced staff. A variety of measures are used effectively to recruit and retain staff. For example, Lancashire’s children’s services awards have been established to recognise innovation and skills. This is an improving picture for Lancashire and retention rates have improved in the past year.

The quality assurance framework, which includes auditing activity, is more effective and reliable than it was at the time of the last inspection. The local authority’s self-evaluation recognises that the quality of practice, while improving, is variable across the county. There is now a clearer focus on improving outcomes for children and developing purposeful practice.

The local authority’s approach to performance management is still a work in progress. Although increasingly accurate and well presented in most areas, frontline managers are not always using information and data as dynamic tools to measure progress, explore gaps, patterns and trends. This limits the ability of senior leaders to provide effective challenge by holding middle and senior managers fully to account. (Recommendation)

Progress in developing an effective early help service in collaboration with partner agencies has been too slow. Services to help children and families experiencing domestic abuse are underdeveloped and do not focus on preventing and reducing incidents of abuse.

Inspection findings

79. Senior managers, the chief executive and political leaders are aware of their respective responsibilities and the priorities for children's services. Additionally, the recently improved visibility and communication from senior leaders has given staff a renewed confidence and energy in their efforts to improve services. Ofsted monitoring visits have been effectively used by staff at all levels to reflect on progress, and to make appropriate changes. The recent joint local area special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities inspection in Lancashire identified significant areas of weakness in the local area's practice, which has triggered a much-needed change programme for the support offered to disabled children and their families.
80. The interim executive DCS is an experienced leader whose consistent approach to the role has been highly valued by staff at all levels. The interim deputy DCS has an impressive knowledge of the frontline practice and knows services well. Evidence of their impact can be seen in children's case auditing, which has improved and now accurately highlights areas of strength, and when practice needs to improve. It was reassuring to find that the local authority's own audit findings closely corresponded to the findings of inspectors. Key points for learning are routinely identified and shared with staff through the quality assurance process. This is beginning to make a positive difference in the quality of practice, although greater consistency is not yet in place across the service.
81. Managers now have a good understanding of the issues which impact on attracting and retaining social workers. Work to improve recruiting and retaining social workers has had some impact. However, it remains the case that because of staff turnover, a significant number of children still experience too many changes of social worker.
82. The authority is involved in a teaching partnership with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). Seventy-three family support workers will participate in the social work degree apprenticeship scheme, which will see them qualify in three years. Additionally, Lancashire county council successfully encourages students in their final placements to stay. Currently, 70% of students are successfully applying and staying in the service. This, when viewed alongside excellent retention rates for social workers in their assessed and supported year of employment, means that the pressures on the workforce are easing.
83. The social work academy, launched in September 2017, was originally focused on providing a thorough two-week induction programme. This has now been enhanced to include call back days, learning briefings and mandatory sessions delivered by advanced practitioners. The leadership academy launched in April 2018 involves internal and external training modules. Although it is too soon to see the results of this programme, it is evidence of Lancashire's ambition to

become a learning organisation, and staff welcome the development opportunities.

84. More locally based management structures are helping closer oversight of practice. While this has mainly focused on compliance, there is evidence that it is contributing to the gradual improvement in quality of practice. These structures do not bring clarity and uniformity to procedure and decision-making. Structures are currently different across districts. Some staff with the same role have different job titles and this can be confusing, especially for families and partner agencies.
85. Partnerships such as the health and well-being board and the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) are working well together to progress different issues that impact on children and their families, for example domestic abuse, which is an appropriate priority for both boards. Governance arrangements with the LSCB are well established and include regular, effective meetings between the independent chair and the DCS.
86. Multi-agency strategic partnerships have been strengthened in order to enable a shared approach. The impact of this can be seen in a more effective MASH and increased attendance at core groups and strategy discussions. However, there is further work to do to increase partners' knowledge and understanding and fully engage them in coordinating services for children.
87. The children's services commissioning plan is not sufficiently strong. While informed by a thorough joint strategic needs analysis (JSNA), the overarching commissioning plan is currently informed by the health and well-being board strategy but does not focus sufficiently on the needs of children. It does, however, include starting life well, early years provision and care leavers as priority areas. Other commissioning developments include emotional health and well-being training being delivered to school staff, and a sharper focus on commissioning services for children with disabilities following recommendations from the recent SEN and/or disabilities inspection.
88. Domestic abuse services are currently commissioned through the police and crime commissioner's board. Children's services contribute financially to this agenda and pay for victim support to work with families. However, there is a lack of effective work with perpetrators of domestic abuse, and not enough targeted support for children who are experiencing domestic abuse in their home. (Recommendation)
89. Lancashire suspended its children and young people's (CYP) trust board approximately 12 months ago. The children's services improvement board and LSCB have focused on strategic change and joint planning. There is a CYP plan in place that is currently being refreshed following consultation with young people and partner agencies.
90. Innovative projects, such as developing a bid for a social impact bond to commission work with children on the edge of care to keep them at home

with their families, are in development. Additionally, work by the commissioning team to identify children who could safely transition from residential care into specialist foster placements is underway and is enabling children to live in families when possible. These plans could be further strengthened by ensuring that IROs and managers from social care are more involved in their development, to ensure that children's views are fully represented, and that best practice is considered, in addition to best value.

91. Senior partners in the legal process, such as the designated family judge and the local Children and Family Court advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) manager, state that the county's performance in court has recently improved. The introduction of a rigorous quality assurance process by the legal department aims to ensure that documentation presented to court is of acceptable content and quality. However, the quality and timeliness of pre-proceedings work remain inconsistent.
92. The local authority has an effective corporate parenting board. By adopting an innovative and creative approach to meetings with children and young people, the board has engaged and enthused its members, who are clearly committed to improving the lives of children looked after. The board does not have sufficiently robust reporting and governance arrangements so that it can evidence the impact of the work it undertakes.
93. Learning from serious case reviews is not having sufficient impact on practice. While there has been some work undertaken to examine themes and trends, such as concealed or denied pregnancy, this has not led to an effective, and timely, multi-agency plan to improve recognition and support for the most vulnerable pregnant women.
94. Complaints are largely addressed at an early stage, avoiding recourse to formal investigations. The complaints team works closely with the advocacy service to identify formal and informal routes for resolving issues quickly. Recurring themes concern assessment quality, communication with social workers and information sharing. Learning from complaints is disseminated appropriately by a team of advanced practitioners who hold workshops with staff.
95. Social workers' caseloads have reduced overall, although some social workers continue to have high workloads. Staff supervision is regular, detailed and appropriately focused on learning and development. It is also increasingly reflective, with opportunities to study cases in depth. However, the impact of workload pressures is not clearly documented nor addressed to further support improvements in practice.
96. The quality and value of performance data was an issue at the previous inspection and, while there has been improvement in this area, it remains a work in progress that the local authority continues to address. Although increasingly accurate and well presented in most areas, frontline managers

are not always using information and data as a dynamic tool to measure progress, explore gaps, patterns and trends. (Recommendation)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of eight of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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