

Cambridgeshire

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 14 January 2019 to 18 January 2019

Lead inspector: Dominic Stevens
Her Majesty's Inspector

| Judgement | Grade |
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| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Good |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection | Requires improvement |
| The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers | Requires improvement |
| Overall effectiveness | Requires improvement |

Since the last inspection, changes of senior leadership, restructuring of services, rising demand and challenges in recruiting enough social workers have had a negative impact on how well and how quickly children and their families receive help and support. Leaders have recognised this and have taken a series of well-considered actions, backed by financial investment, which have begun to improve the quality and impact of work with children, young people and their families.

In most cases, the services the local authority provides make a positive difference to children's current and likely future welfare. However, some of the changes that leaders have introduced are still relatively new and, because of this, their impact is limited. The quality and the timeliness of services remain less than good for too many children. For these children, the local authority is not making the positive difference it could and should.

The most significant challenge to the local authority's ability to provide consistently good services to children, young people and their families has been, and continues to be, the size of caseloads. These are too high for most social

workers and unsustainable in some teams. The impact of this is that, too often, social workers and frontline managers have had to focus on the most urgent and important work to secure children's immediate safety, without sufficient capacity for the follow-up work needed to sustain change within families or to ensure that children in care have permanent homes as soon as possible. The local authority has made progress in tackling this challenge. Additional investment in staffing and other related measures are reducing caseloads. This is enabling staff to tackle drift and delay in work with children and to improve the quality of services that they receive. However, this progress needs to be sustained and built on before most children receive a consistently good service.

What needs to improve

- The capacity of social work teams to complete work to a consistently good standard and to ensure that children and families receive the help they need as quickly as possible.
- The consistency and quality of direct work undertaken with children, and how well this is used to inform help and support for them and their families.
- The frequency, quality and impact of management supervision of social work practice.
- The effectiveness of arrangements to promote health and education and to secure permanence for children in care.

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

1. The help and protection that children, young people and their families receive in Cambridgeshire requires improvement. A significant minority of children do not get the help and support they need quickly enough. Too many assessments take longer than they should and do not fully explore underlying problems or the wishes and feelings of children. Significant workload pressures in teams across the county mean that there is much variability in who gets what help and support as well as in its effectiveness.
2. Staff are working hard to make a positive difference for children but are held back by the impact of high caseloads. This situation is improving, but caseloads remain too high for many social workers to do effective work with children and their families. Social workers and their managers are doing their best to ensure that the most urgent and important work is tackled in a timely and effective manner. They are largely achieving this. However, this comes at a cost, particularly for work that may be less urgent but of equal importance. Inspectors found that, for some children, visits were overdue or cancelled at the last minute and assessments were not completed in timescales that matched children's needs. Once initial visits have established that children are safe, follow-up visits to children sometimes take too long. There are delays in the completion of child in need plans. Although a strengthened management focus is improving matters, there remains a lack of sufficient pace and rigour in using the public law outline (PLO) to effect change for children experiencing chronic harm or neglect.
3. These shortfalls exist not only where the pressure of work is greatest on staff, but also where there is less effective oversight of practice. Consequently, it is children in need, rather than those who are the subject of child protection plans, who are most likely to experience delays in visits and the provision of help and in work being progressed with them and their families.
4. Not surprisingly, work is more often of a higher standard in teams with lower caseloads. For example, work with disabled children is of a good standard, with well-considered plans that address not only the needs of children that arise from their disability, but also their safeguarding and wider welfare needs. Social workers know these children well.
5. A recently established early help hub (EHH) is proving to be a well-managed, effective service. Co-location with the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the missing, exploited and trafficked hub (MET) team allows for the ready exchange of information and professional expertise. Staff in the EHH take good account not only of current concerns and information from background checks but also of children's histories. This means that threshold judgements and

recommendations about next steps are generally well matched to need, including decisions to step up to MASH or to children's assessment teams for a statutory social work service.

6. There is more to do to increase the numbers of early help assessments being carried out and to encourage agencies other than children's social care to take up the role of lead professional. However, the use of these assessments is increasing, in particular by primary schools. This means that children and their families are progressively more likely to receive the early support they need before their needs escalate and they require a statutory social work intervention.
7. New arrangements for assessing referrals about children and young people within the MASH were launched in November 2018. Even at this relatively early stage of their development, they are working well. Almost all decisions are well matched to presenting risk and need, and most are dealt with in a timely manner. Social workers and children's information and advice officers in the MASH are knowledgeable and show appropriate professional curiosity. They make good use of both information from background checks with partner agencies and the expertise of colleagues, for example in the MET hub. This means that their recommendations to managers about threshold decisions and next steps are evidence based and almost always well matched to need and risk.
8. The work of the MET hub in carrying out return home interviews when children have been missing from home or care is impressive. All children are offered an interview, and a high percentage of these are completed within 72 hours of children returning or being found. Interviews are conducted skilfully, so that children and young people are engaged well in conversations and the learning and recommendations that arise are of real value in helping keep children safe in the future. The hub's work in monitoring children at risk of child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation across the county and linking with multi-agency child sexual exploitation meetings (MACE) is also strong. However, the local authority could draw greater benefit from this resource, which offers a depth of specialist knowledge and skills. Inspectors saw some situations in which the extent of children's vulnerability to sexual or criminal exploitation had not been fully understood by area-based social work teams, and in which young people at shared risk had been considered in isolation rather than as part of a network.
9. Daily multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs) are well run and well attended and, consequently, are an effective mechanism for strengthening the coordination of work to reduce the impact of domestic abuse on children. However, child in need and child protection plans are not routinely shared with MARACs. For some children, this reduces the effectiveness of the help and protection they receive.
10. Good use is made both of clinicians and of children's practitioners in direct work with children and families. This, along with good engagement by partner

agencies in child in need meetings and child protection core groups, enhances the quality and impact of social work with children and families. Child protection strategy discussions are held swiftly when the need arises. They are well attended by relevant agencies and reach appropriate and evidence-based decisions with clear follow-up actions.

11. New adolescent teams, set up in November 2018 to work with older children in need, have the potential to be a real asset. Staff have good knowledge, experience and skills and are getting to know children well. This is leading to good assessments and effective interventions. However, these teams are, as yet, only partially staffed and this lack of capacity has limited their impact.
12. Assessments are detailed and, in most cases, clearly outline key risk and protective factors. However, they do not always make good use of direct work with children to provide a clear sense of children's lives and, despite ongoing improvement in how quickly they are completed, a significant minority are still not produced within timescales that match children's individual circumstances. This delays help for these children and tends to direct professional focus to adult needs rather than children's lived experience.
13. Child in need and child protection plans are generally clear and well matched to risk and need. However, plans, particularly child in need plans, are not always put in place as swiftly or used as well as they could be to progress work with children.
14. Managers provide clear guidance and direction at the point that work with individual children is allocated to staff, and at the start of assessments. However, the quality of supervision and management oversight then reduces and means that children's plans are not progressed in a timely and effective way. Inspectors did see some examples of high-quality and effective supervision, but this is the exception rather than the rule.
15. The local authority has robust processes in place for tracking and monitoring the welfare of children who are electively home educated. There are also effective systems to identify those children who go missing from education.

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

16. Leaders have recognised that the former structure, made up of generic 'life-long' social work units and 14–25 teams, did not ensure a sufficiently sharp focus on children in care and care leavers, and on the need to progress court work and ensure that they have permanent homes as soon as possible. A stronger strategic focus on children in care and care leavers, an increase in staffing and, in the last few months, the establishment of dedicated teams for these children have started to address weaknesses in practice.

17. There remains more to do before the local authority can deliver consistently good services for children. While not as high as in the assessment and children's teams, social work caseloads and the pressure of work has slowed progress by the children in care teams. The local authority's quality audits have shown that weaknesses in practice, while less prevalent, continue to have an impact for a significant minority of children. Although inspectors found examples of good practice, they also found that caseload pressures are making it very difficult for some social workers to do much more than focus on completing statutory visits, with insufficient capacity, for activities such as direct work and life-story work. Overdue visits and poor plans and case recording remain problems in a significant minority of children's cases. For some children, plans are not updated to reflect their current circumstances and needs, for example not clearly stating their wishes about contact with brothers, sisters, parents and others who are important to them.
18. Similarly, work to ensure that children have permanent homes is not always pursued with sufficient pace or rigour. For example, matches with suitable long-term carers are not always completed for children following discussions at panel meetings to advise on permanent care arrangements. Arrangements for tracking how quickly and effectively permanent homes are secured for children are not currently giving leaders a sufficiently clear and current picture of how well this work is progressing. While adoption numbers have risen slightly in the last year, more needs to be done to achieve safe and timely permanence through adoption, special guardianship and reunification with birth families. A new project for supporting the safe return of children to their birth families is a positive initiative, but it is yet to have a significant impact.
19. Too often, the health needs of children are not being well met. The local authority is working hard with health agencies to address this, but the timeliness of initial and review health assessments, dental checks and immunisations for children in care remains poor.
20. Although there are several areas where the consistency and quality of work need to improve, inspectors also found that most children live in placements that meet their needs, that most are making progress and that placement stability is good. Social workers visit most children in line with statutory guidance and in many cases more often.
21. Children are encouraged to participate in their own reviews. These are well chaired by independent reviewing officers and are attended by a broad range of relevant partner agencies. Minutes of reviews are clear, and care plans are generally well matched to children's individual needs.
22. A strong training package for foster carers is complemented by good support from their supervising social workers. Assessments of carers are generally good, sometimes very good. Social workers' recommendations about the terms on

which new carers are approved are specific and appropriate to individual carers' skills and circumstances. This helps to ensure that children are only placed with carers who are well matched to their needs. This has led to more stable and positive placements for children and helps to retain carers, because they are less likely to have children they cannot manage placed with them.

23. Carers receive regular supervision, but until recently was not been the case for connected persons' carers, who received a lesser service. Since November 2018, support for these carers has moved to within the fostering team. This support provides a foundation for ensuring that, in the future, these carers, and by extension the children placed with them, receive a service of the same good standard as most foster carers.
24. When it is recognised that a child could benefit from adoption, this is progressed swiftly for most children. In part, this is because the local authority has been successful in increasing the pool of potential adopters. The response to people who enquire about adoption is timely and makes them feel welcomed. Pre- and post-adoption support for adopters is strong. Children have adoption support plans that help make sure that their needs are assessed, and that people know who should be meeting these needs. The plans make a real difference to the lives of children and their adoptive carers.
25. The quality of services that care leavers receive is improving, with a significant uplift in the number of personal advisers within a new team structure. The local authority is now remaining in touch with more care leavers, a higher percentage of whom live in suitable accommodation. The number of care leavers in employment, education or training is much higher than they were before.
26. The local authority's sign-up to the national transfer scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children reflects its commitment to these children. Social workers know these children and young people well. They make good use of interpreters in their work and show a keen awareness of the benefits of advocacy for this group of young people. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, including those with no recourse to public funds, live in placements that are well matched to their needs. However, although the team that works with these young people is now fully staffed, it is still dealing with a legacy of high caseloads from recent staffing pressures and consequent drift and delay in progressing work with some young people.
27. Work to prepare children in care and care leavers for independence is not strong. Most pathway plans do not help with this. Many are lengthy but lack a sufficient depth of consideration of young people's needs or aspiration for their futures. This is because most plans are not completed in partnership with young people and, consequently, do not provide a strong sense of young people's lived experiences or a clear route map for providing support and progressing their welfare.

28. A review of the work of the virtual school has been completed and its recommendations are beginning to be implemented. However, it is too early to see the impact of this work. At present, there is too little strategic oversight of the progress that pupils make or of the impact of personal education plans. While some of these plans are effective, a significant minority do not meet the needs of children in care well. The quality assurance by the virtual school of these plans is inconsistent, and so weak practice is not always identified or challenged.

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

29. Leaders and managers have taken a series of well-considered actions to address weaknesses in the quality and impact of services for children. Through their own self-assessment and the intelligent use of peer review and other external evidence-based analysis, they recognised that, despite a high level of commitment from staff, their previous model for delivering services was not delivering well enough for children in Cambridgeshire. These weaknesses were compounded by high caseloads, making it very difficult for social workers to complete work beyond the most immediate tasks in a timely manner or to a consistently good standard. Over the course of 2018, the local authority increased staffing and implemented a more coherent team structure. The re-modelling of the MASH is ensuring faster and more consistent progression of referrals about children, while the replacement of 'life-long' social work units and 14–25 teams with specialist teams has improved the focus on the distinct needs of children in different circumstances, for example the differing needs of a pre-school child living at home compared to those of an older young person preparing to leave care. These new teams include dedicated assessment, children in care and care leaver teams.

30. Whole-council ownership of the change programme and strong political backing have secured significant additional investment. This has, for example, been used to increase the numbers of social workers and independent reviewing officers in response to greater numbers of children in care. Fruitful cooperation with neighbouring Peterborough Council has included some shared leadership and service delivery.

31. The local authority's management of the change programme has been intelligent and effective. Despite the inevitable disruption inherent in any major restructuring of services, the local authority has kept its staff well informed and engaged in the process. While there has been some reduction in pressures since the recent introduction of the new structure, many social workers continue to labour under high and, in a few teams, excessive caseloads. Despite this, staff morale is generally high. Social workers and other staff who spoke to inspectors were overwhelmingly optimistic about the future. They describe a positive culture and direction in the way leaders are re-shaping services.

32. Targeted investment is supporting some important improvements in the quality of services. The local authority has begun to tackle the significant pressures that have affected practice for children and their families. Positive action has included increasing the number of social workers and independent reviewing officers and making focused use of agency staff. Leaders have also implemented a non-social work qualified children's practitioner role which operates alongside social workers and clinicians with good oversight from social work managers. However, the continuing impact of unsustainably high caseloads for many social workers remains the biggest single threat to sustaining improvements in the quality of services for children.
33. It is as a corporate parent that the local authority's work with children was previously most lacking in pace and rigour. Again, although there is more to do, progress has been made in improving the quality of practice and actions necessary to sustain further progress have been taken. Dedicated children in care and care leaver teams now ensure a sharper focus on the needs of these children and young people. Staff are working through a backlog and drift in work that the new teams inherited. Developments focused on reuniting children in care with their families when it is safe to do so and providing 'staying close' accommodation for young people who have lived in residential homes, are showing positive results, if at an early stage in terms of capacity and impact. A strengthened approach to fostering recruitment is also beginning to bear fruit.
34. Leaders and managers know well the key strengths and weaknesses of services in Cambridgeshire. They have used peer and other external reviews and worked closely with the local safeguarding children board (LSCB) to engage partner agencies and to drive and monitor progress. This has supported, for example, the involvement of the police, health agencies and schools in implementing the new MASH arrangements. However, performance management information lacks sufficient clarity and depth of analysis to provide a detailed and up-to-date picture of practice to support improvement work. Systems to track and drive the progression of work, such as monitoring how quickly children achieve permanence, or the use of pre-proceedings processes under the PLO, are not yet used to best effect. Managers have achieved some improvements and are working hard to make the local authority's range of panel meetings and performance tracking documents more effective.
35. The local authority is, however, making good use of thematic audits. This is proving increasingly effective in helping managers to have a clear understanding of the quality and impact of frontline practice, so that improvement work is increasingly being targeted to good effect.
36. The local authority is committed to engaging with children and young people and using their views in the development of its services. There are several forums in which children and young people can express their thoughts and feelings, including 'voices matter', Cambridgeshire's children in care council, the care leavers forum and the 'speak out council' for disabled children. While this is

positive, the local authority is not yet where it wants to be in creating a strong culture of participation, engagement and consultation. However, senior leaders have a clear and ambitious strategy to take participation and engagement to the next level, one that includes targeted consultation, feedback questionnaires, parental reports, independent 1:1 interviews and exit interviews. Further work is planned to extend the uptake and use of the 'mind of my own' (MOMO) app, and a service user forum for children in need, and those who are subject of a child protection plan, is due to be launched shortly. Although yet to be implemented, these are positive developments that have the capacity to further strengthen participation and engagement.



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