

Cheshire West and Chester

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 18 March 2019 to 22 March 2019

Lead inspector: Mandy Nightingale HMI

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

Cheshire West and Chester children’s services are good. Leaders and managers have continued to improve provision for children and families since the previous inspection of children’s services in 2015 under the Single Inspection Framework as well as the Joint Targeted Area Inspection in 2017. These improvements have included taking positive action to address the recommendations and findings from these inspections. There have been significant improvements within early help and prevention (EHP) and the ‘front door’, plus a focus on edge of care and on restructuring services for disabled children, which means that most children in receipt of these services have good support. For a small number of children, there is further work required to be done to ensure that information is gained from all relevant agencies through strategy meetings before decisions are made.

The majority of children and families in Cheshire West and Chester continue to receive a good service from experienced, skilled and well-supported social workers. Children’s needs are identified well and their risks are reduced, and they achieve positive change through coordinated multi-agency intervention. Children’s ethnicity is often not explored well. A small number of children’s records are not detailed or up to date, which limits the extent to which they can inform decision-making for children. Ongoing support to promote children’s educational progress is improving outcomes for children in care at key stages 3 and 4.

There are strong partnerships in place, at both strategic and operational levels, and this leads to proactive and coordinated intervention for children. The council has

invested resources well to increase staffing to address high caseloads. For some teams, this has been effective. However, for others it is too early to see whether there has been any impact on timely progression of plans for all children.

Most social workers receive regular and reflective supervision and they are supported to learn and develop their skills through a comprehensive learning and development programme. The local authority has successfully implemented a revised quality assurance framework, which is supporting thematic learning across all services. However, the auditing process does not always include frontline workers sufficiently well in order to support individual learning on a case-by-case basis.

What needs to improve

- Up-to-date recording of practice with children and their families that provides an accurate account to inform decision-making for children.
- Social workers' exploration of the impact of diversity on children's lived experiences.
- Consistency of decision-making to hold strategy meetings involving partner agencies where concerns are raised for children at risk of significant harm.
- Social workers having full information from practice reviews and audits for children on their caseloads in order to help them to learn and develop their practice.

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

1. The initial access to resources team (iART) provides an effective 'front door' service, ensuring that children receive a timely response when they require additional support. The threshold criteria are understood by partners and they apply this appropriately when referring concerns about children. Multi-agency partnership working is a strength in the iART and leads to children and families receiving the right level of service for them. Strong and supportive relationships with schools mean that children's wishes and feelings are sought by school staff who know them well, in order to inform decision-making at this early stage. When a referral is made to iART, social workers ensure that the consent of parents has been obtained.
2. Incidents of domestic abuse are well considered, and children receive an appropriate service as a result of the daily risk meetings between police and children's social care. Lower-level domestic abuse incidents that have been graded as 'standard' by the police are not recorded as a contact on children's records. This limits the historical overview of recorded information for children. The local authority acknowledged this finding during the inspection and,

demonstrating its strength as a learning organisation, promptly agreed to give consideration to this as it continues to strengthen its domestic abuse offer.

3. There is some inconsistency in the way concerns for children outside of office hours are responded to by the emergency duty team (EDT). The team aims to provide a bespoke service for children who require out-of-office-hours monitoring. However, when workload demands are high, EDT social workers do not always have the capacity to respond to concerns about children swiftly. For one child in particular, there was a significant delay in responding to concerns for their safety and welfare. Children's records are not always updated in a timely way, and some require greater detail in order to explain the rationale for decision-making and actions taken out of office hours.
4. Experienced managers in the EHP service ensure that children quickly receive a timely response from the most appropriate agency. Families and referrers are offered effective information and advice if a service is not required. When concerns escalate for children receiving an EHP service, these are promptly discussed with children's social care, and children's cases are stepped up for statutory intervention without delay.
5. When child protection risks are identified at the front door, social workers in the iART make timely decisions and recommendations for actions, and children's cases are swiftly transferred to the children in need (CIN) teams. Multi-agency strategy meetings are well attended by partners and are used effectively to consider the risks to children, in order to make informed decisions about next steps. For a small number of children, including vulnerable adolescents who are facing particular complexities of risk from gangs, radicalisation and county lines, the local authority does not consistently convene strategy meetings when risks are first identified. Social worker assessment and response minimises the impact of not having a strategy meeting, but opportunities are missed for discussing children's risks and needs with professionals from other agencies in order to inform interventions for these children.
6. When decisions are made to undertake child protection enquiries, these are carried out promptly and consider the views of children, their families and other professionals. Social workers use this information well to inform their analysis of risk and the impact of this for children, and to reach clear decisions.
7. The majority of assessments of children's needs are strong, and some are excellent. Strong assessments consider historical information well, are child focused and use research appropriately. Assessments are enhanced through consistent use of the resilience vulnerability matrix to inform social workers' analysis of risk to children and future planning. Management oversight and decision-making is clearly evident in assessments. Most assessments are completed within a timescale appropriate to the child's needs and if assessments reach 25 days from their start, a CIN plan is developed. At 35

days, a multi-agency meeting is convened. This means that children are not experiencing delays in receiving a service while their assessment is ongoing.

8. A restructure of the children with disabilities service has resulted in most children receiving an appropriate intervention that is in accordance with their assessed need. However, not all assessments of children's needs are regularly reviewed and updated by the professionals involved with the child in order to maintain an appropriate level of intervention.
9. Children are seen in accordance with their needs and are enabled to build good relationships with experienced and skilled social workers and family intervention workers. Practitioners engage in thoughtful direct work with children: they seek children's wishes and feelings effectively and they record and act on these.
10. Planning for most children is a strength. Plans are thorough, addressed to the child and are very child-focused and specific to their needs. Children, families and partners are engaged effectively in reviewing children's plans through well-attended core groups and reviews, including child protection conferences. This leads to relevant and timely support and intervention for children. When children's plans are not as strong, the actions are too generic, making it difficult for children, families and other professionals to fully understand what needs to change and how this will be achieved. While most review meetings consider progress against children's plans effectively, some do not and, therefore, it is difficult to see how the specific actions of the plan have progressed.
11. When child in need or child protection intervention is not effecting change and reducing risk for children, decision-making is good. This includes effective and timely use of the public law outline and setting out clear expectations of parents. Pre-proceedings work is supported by effective edge of care and family group conferencing services. This results in timely decisions being made to initiate legal proceedings and to secure permanence decisions for children. Managers maintain oversight of pre-proceedings work with the effective use of relevant trackers. The judiciary and Cafcass reported similar findings to those identified by the inspection team, and they highly regard the work of social workers, managers and legal representatives.
12. Social workers use risk assessment tools effectively to analyse the risks of abuse, including neglect, physical and sexual abuse and exposure to domestic abuse and the impact of these on children. A wide and varied range of specialist services are available and accessed by children and families in order to address their specific needs, including mental health, domestic abuse and substance abuse services.
13. Ethnicity and diversity issues are not sufficiently considered for children and young people during assessments, planning and direct work. Practitioners and managers do not demonstrate enough professional curiosity to explore the

impact of diversity for most children, meaning that they do not always have a full understanding of the child's lived experience.

14. The local authority responds well to children at risk of, or suffering, child sexual exploitation. Senior multi-agency leaders regularly monitor the risks for the most vulnerable children. Learning from practice and an external peer review, endorsed by the safeguarding children's board, informs strategic planning to improve services for these vulnerable children.
15. Children missing from home or care are quickly identified and reported to children's social care. Children are promptly allocated a practitioner, who offers to carry out a return home interview (RHI). However, these are not always taken up by young people, particularly those who have had repeat missing episodes and those who do not wish to engage with the service. Staff are persistent in their attempts to engage with these young people. Senior leaders appropriately recommissioned services for these vulnerable children in order to strengthen the local authority response to them. There have been some delays uploading the RHI information to the children's record as the commissioned service did not, until recently, have access to the integrated children's system.
16. Children who present as homeless receive a prompt response which includes assessment of their needs, mediation and help finding accommodation. However, it is not always clear that young people's rights to come into care are explored with them.
17. Through effective partnership working with the Cheshire West and Chester safeguarding children's board, the police and children's social care, the number of children detained in custody overnight is reducing. The needs of children known to the local authority who are detained in custody overnight are considered and prioritised well through regular and informative contact between the police and children's social care.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good

18. Children and young people come into care in a timely way when it is in their best interest. Management oversight, including by senior managers, is clear and provides an initial plan for the child or young person. This helps social workers to ensure that children's needs will be met at this early stage of coming into care.
19. Social workers take time to get to know the children they work with and engage them in creative and purposeful direct work. This helps social workers to understand the child or young person's wishes and feelings so that they can make plans with them, their families and other agencies that protect them.

20. Permanence options for children are well considered. These options include kinship care, adoption and long-term foster care, through detailed assessments and planning. Children's assessments and plans are completed to a high standard and these provide the basis for work that positively affects their outcomes. Support for children and carers when a Special Guardianship Order is considered or granted is individually tailored and progresses children's plans for permanence.
21. Children's plans are reviewed regularly by independent reviewing officers (IROs) who know them well. IROs visit children in between reviews to monitor the progress of their care plan and to obtain their wishes and feelings. Partners and children routinely participate in review meetings that consider the child's current circumstances, to review the care plan and to agree actions to improve outcomes for the child. Children's review documents are mostly timely and are written in a style that is addressed to the child.
22. Children spend time with their family and friends and they are supported effectively to maintain these important links. Children are encouraged to engage in activities outside of school to enhance their learning and social skills.
23. Children live with carers who meet their needs well. When children are placed out of the local authority area, they continue to receive the same level of service as those who are placed within the local authority area.
24. The local authority has effective tracking systems in place to monitor placements for all children in care. When children are placed with their parents subject to a care order, the local authority makes good use of its specialist services and plans effectively for revocation of the care order when this is deemed to be in the child's best interest. This is leading to a decrease in the numbers of children subject to a care order at home with their parent appropriately.
25. Whenever possible, children are matched appropriately to carers. Placement stability is improving, and this means that children are experiencing fewer changes of placement. Children receive high-quality care from foster carers who know them well. Where suitable foster placements cannot be identified for a small number of children, their needs are met through carefully considered risk assessments and care plans.
26. Foster carer recruitment, assessment, training and support are effective. Foster carers spoke highly of the support from their supervising social worker.
27. The virtual school works in close partnership with social workers and carers to ensure that children's educational needs are prioritised. The virtual school seeks to ensure that children receive the support they need to succeed in their education. However, the local authority is aware that there is more to do to

- improve the educational progress of children in care and are proactive in achieving this, with improvements being seen during 2018.
28. Adopters are well supported by the regional adoption agency 'Together 4 Adoption'.
 29. The local authority had previously recognised a need to improve the quality of child permanence records and, through additional specialist training for social workers, there has been some improvement for children, although the quality of child permanence reports is not consistently good.
 30. Children in permanent foster placements are provided with good information about their life histories. This helps them to understand their care journey and the reasons why they came into care. Life-story work is not always prepared in a timely way for children placed for adoption. This means that children are not always effectively supported to make the transition to a permanent home with a clear understanding of why they were placed with their adoptive carers. Some later-life letters are written using language which is not clear, and children are unable to understand the reasons why they were placed with their adoptive parents and became adopted.
 31. The majority of children benefit from strong permanence planning, and they have their permanent placements identified and confirmed effectively. When workloads are demanding, a small number of children experience delays in having their plan for permanence in their long-term foster placement endorsed by the fostering panel.
 32. Most children have their physical and emotional health needs assessed and appropriately met. Previous delays for children accessing a health assessment have been effectively addressed by the local authority. Senior managers rightly recognised that there was a rising demand for services to meet children's mental and emotional health needs. They commissioned a specialist service to meet these needs for their children in care and this is proving to be effective for most children.
 33. Social workers and personal advisers (PAs) are ambitious for care leavers. Most pathway plans are comprehensive and are completed collaboratively with young people. The local authority has appropriately initiated a review of young people's plans to better engage them in their planning processes.
 34. Care leavers are encouraged and supported to gain independence when it is right for them. Staying put is an option for some care leavers, and most others live in suitable accommodation with additional support as needed. However, some more vulnerable care leavers do not live in suitable accommodation and they live for too long in accommodation such as bed and breakfast establishments. While the use of any bed and breakfast accommodation is unacceptable, the small number of young people using these have had their

risks comprehensively and appropriately assessed and workers maintain regular contact with them.

35. Young people and care leavers are provided with strong support services to help them to access employment education and training (EET). Verified performance data shows an improvement in 16- to 17-year-olds in EET, taking this above the national average. While there is improvement for older care leavers, the proportion who are in EET remains below the national average. Leaders are aware of this and have been proactive in seeking additional resources to improve EET for older care leavers.
36. Support services, including health, the virtual school and housing providers, are effective for many care leavers and improve their circumstances. There are a small number of vulnerable care leavers whose needs for suitable accommodation, EET and emotional health are not being met. The local authority reduces risks for these young people through regular contact. However, this is not resulting in improved outcomes.
37. The local authority has two Children in Care Councils (CiCC): one for younger children and the other for young people. The CiCCs are involved in several activities, including the recruitment of senior leaders, an annual chairing and regular attendance of the corporate parenting board, and an annual survey that informs service planning and delivery. Senior managers ensure that children's achievements are regularly celebrated to acknowledge the progress that they make, including what could be considered small achievements, such as attending school for a full week.

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

38. The strong political and senior leadership team has a wealth of experience and knowledge about children's outcomes across the boroughs of Cheshire West and Chester. Children's social care and the wider partnership use this understanding well to target areas for continued improvement. This has led to positive developments in services for early help and prevention, the 'front door' and for disabled children. A specific focus on improving the edge of care services and the creation of a child in need intervention team means that most children and families receive specialist support at the right time and at the right level to meet their needs.
39. A whole-council and partnership approach has been taken to concentrate on and review the impact of services in one of the local authority's localities in which deprivation is high. A strong understanding of the community identified that families are not always able to access early help and prevention services to prevent escalation of concerns for their children. Current performance shows a reduction in the rate of children in need and an increase in early help and

prevention activity, suggesting that more families are being supported without the need for statutory services. More recently, the local authority has implemented a vision, 'One Children's Service Approach', which has improved joint working across services and access to internal and multi-agency services for children and families. It is too early to see the impact of this on improving children's outcomes.

40. Leaders have ensured that children's services remain a corporate priority and the council and the partnership are in the early stages of implementing a new practice model 'new ways of working'. The practice model aims to achieve a common approach to practice across the threshold continuum. A comprehensive roll-out programme is in place, but it is too early to see the impact of this on social work practice and outcomes for children.
41. The lead member for children and families chairs the corporate parenting board and raises the profile of children in care throughout the council. This has proven effective, with the achievement of a council tax waiver for care leavers, laptops for children in care and free leisure passes for fostering households.
42. The local authority is responsive to the changing demand for services. For example, they initiated the development of a sub-regional foster carer recruitment hub, Foster4. The local authority also responded appropriately to concerns about the quality of services for children missing from home or care and for children who are subject to, or at risk of, child sexual exploitation, by joining an existing sub-regional group to re-commission services for these children. Where appropriate, deprivation of liberty orders are clearly considered for children and young people, and the local judiciary reported Cheshire West and Chester to be leaders in the field of these orders.
43. Senior leaders have developed a strong culture of learning across children's services. They have a comprehensive approach to seeking the views of children and their families and to learning from complaints and serious case reviews. This intelligence then informs service development as well as a strong learning and development offer to children's social care staff and the wider partnership. For example, the local authority supported the CiCC to develop and deliver training for social workers and elected members on their lived experiences as children in care.
44. The recently reviewed quality assurance framework effectively links the learning from practice reviews and audits to workforce and service development. In this framework, there is a missed opportunity for allocated workers to be fully engaged in practice reviews and they do not consistently receive comprehensive feedback of strengths and areas for improvement for their cases. A lack of detailed recording of the findings from practice reviews and the rationale for the local authority's gradings does not reflect the depth of discussions reported to inspectors.

45. A well-structured performance and monitoring process supports managers and leaders at all levels to contribute to improving practice and outcomes for children. However, data is not always of a good quality. At the time of the inspection, data relating to suitable accommodation for care leavers was not accurate and needed to be reviewed. As a result, leaders and managers were not able to use this to effectively inform their work.
46. The vast majority of social workers have regular supervision; however, this is not consistent in every team. For some social workers, their one-to-one supervision has not been sufficiently regular given the complexity of their caseloads. Some supervision records do not always reflect the quality of the discussion reported by social workers and some records only contain a list of tasks to complete. Throughout children's records, there is evidence of good management oversight and this is clearly recorded to help social workers to focus on the direction and priority for their interventions. Staff say that managers and leaders are always available and willing to discuss children's circumstances.
47. While the local authority increased resources for additional social workers in some teams, this has not reduced caseloads for all social workers and we have seen the impact of this on a small number of children.
48. Children benefit from a stable and resilient workforce. Staff are positive about working in Cheshire West and Chester; they ensure that they know the children they work with well and demonstrate this when talking about them. Social workers have access to a comprehensive learning and development package and are supported to develop their skills, experience and qualifications through a well-embedded 'grow your own' framework. Staff report opportunities to progress into more senior positions in the organisation and develop their skills through moving around different service areas. This means that social workers are able to gain more experience and knowledge to support the children and families they work with.



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