

# Derbyshire County Council

## Inspection of children’s social care services

**Inspection dates: 8 July 2019 to 12 July 2019 and 7 August 2019 to 8 August 2019**

**Lead inspector: Julie Knight  
Her Majesty’s Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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 to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Following the single inspection in 2013, a council restructure led to a substantial reduction in leadership and management capacity in children’s services. Combined with a period of organisational instability, this resulted in a significant decline in the quality of services for vulnerable children. When appointed in 2016, the executive director for children’s services (DCS) identified the root causes of the decline and the key priority actions necessary to improve services. She acted to secure the support of political and corporate leaders, ensuring significant re-investment in the service. The establishment of a stronger leadership team has created stability at a strategic level across the service.

The senior leadership team has a sound understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Members of the team have worked purposefully to tackle shortfalls, and consequently some services are much improved. However, the quality of support and help is not consistent across all services and there remain areas for improvement, particularly in the support offered to care leavers and some children in need. Starting Point (the children’s front door) provides a

timely and effective response when children are at risk of harm, but it takes too long to progress a small minority of referrals when it is less clear about whether social care support is needed. This means that a small number of children wait too long for their needs to be met.

Leaders have taken essential steps to respond to concerns regarding the quality of support provided to care leavers by the previously commissioned service. Action taken to bring the service back in-house in July 2019 was heavily influenced by the views of young people. Although the new service is designed to provide an earlier and better coordinated response to meet the needs of care leavers, and there are early signs of some improvements, it is too soon to demonstrate positive impact.

There is evidence of a sustained trajectory of improvements in many of the services for children. Since the focused visit in 2018, effective work by senior managers, which had commenced prior to that inspection, has resulted in an improved response to children in need of protection. Children now benefit from clearer, more focused planning and timely intervention, which safeguards their welfare. When children come into care, they live in homes that meet their needs. They build positive relationships with dedicated social workers, who spend time getting to know them. Permanence is planned for children at an early stage, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a sensitive and responsive service, including effective support from the virtual school.

Most social workers are well supported, receiving regular supervision and oversight. Service remodelling and significant investment has led to increased capacity in social work and supervisory roles. However, some pressures remain: a minority of social workers have higher caseloads than the local authority target, and the quality of frontline management oversight needs strengthening. Strategic leaders' actions to strengthen performance management and quality assurance arrangements have been successful in ensuring more effective oversight of practice. Audits demonstrate an improving trajectory in respect of the quality of practice and the effectiveness of operational management oversight, which is helping to improve children's outcomes.

### **What needs to improve**

- The timeliness with which Starting Point progress decision-making on contacts when there are no child protection concerns.
- The quality and timeliness of assessment and planning for children in need, including disabled children, those in private fostering arrangements and young people who present as homeless.
- The consistency of the quality of recording of strategy discussions.

- The timeliness of initial personal education plans (PEPs) and initial health assessments for children newly into care.
- The consistency of practice, including the effectiveness of front-line management oversight and supervision.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection in Derbyshire do not have the benefit of consistently good services. Senior managers have acted to strengthen the quality of services, and improvements are evident, for example in the quality of child protection practice since the focused visit in 2018. However, the quality and timeliness of assessment and planning for children in need, particularly for some disabled children, those in private fostering arrangements and young people who present as homeless, require further practice improvements.
2. Children referred to Starting Point (Derbyshire's front door for access to early help and children's services) benefit from a timely and efficient initial triage process. Managers oversee all threshold decisions, and this early prioritisation means that children at risk of significant harm are quickly identified and receive immediate attention. Where decisions regarding next steps for children in need and early help are less clear and further information is needed to inform decision-making, it can take too long for workers to gain this additional information. This can lead to significant delay in identifying the help and services that children may need. The delays in progressing work result from a shortfall in capacity in Starting Point due to an increase in referral activity. Leaders had already identified this pressure prior to the inspection and had begun recruiting additional capacity.
3. When children require early help support, multi-agency team (MAT) workers are extremely effective in providing a range of interventions to support children and their families. Early help assessments appropriately identify whether children need further support from a team around the family (TAF) plan. When children's needs escalate, and they require statutory intervention, they benefit from continued support from the MAT worker, who co-works with locality social workers, providing continuity of relationships for children.
4. Although most children's single assessments identify risks effectively, some are too brief, leading to recommendations for further assessment, which can result in delays in children receiving the help they need. This is, on occasions, compounded by insufficient management oversight. Similar shortfalls are evident in the quality of assessment and support for some disabled children and their families. The remodelling of children's social care teams has resulted in some disabled children having too many changes in social workers. This is

not the same for all disabled children as some benefit from good-quality assessment and support, with the child at the centre of the work.

5. Social workers see children alone and ensure that their views and those of their families are captured in assessments and influence decisions regarding next steps. Some children benefit from meaningful direct work with their social workers, which leads to a reduction in risk and improved outcomes.
6. Children at risk of significant harm receive diligent oversight from the duty manager. When strategy meetings are held, they involve the right key partners, including education partners, and the locality safeguarding social worker. This means that the social worker hears all the information about children's circumstances prior to visiting them, which brings an added continuity to information-sharing about risks. Strategy meetings lead to appropriate decisions to initiate child protection enquiries. This ensures that children's safety is quickly assessed.
7. While strategy meeting decisions are appropriate, the quality of recording is not of a consistently high quality. Often, while decisions are clearly recorded, timescales for interventions are not. Strategy meetings chaired by the child protection manager concerning vulnerable children at risk of exploitation are of good quality and take account of a broad range of multi-agency information on risk to inform safety planning.
8. The quality of information in children's plans fluctuates from being strong, with detailed actions outlining risks and expectations for change, to being weaker, with a lack of focus. Most children in need plans are too adult-focused and do not always consider the needs of all the children in the family. Better plans have a focus on sustainable change, and this is evident for some children at risk of neglect and those witnessing and experiencing domestic abuse at home. This helps managers to make the right decisions to step down to services where positive change is achieved for children or to step up to initiate pre-proceedings when change is too slow. Sometimes actions in these plans are repeated from session to session in social workers' supervision, without a sense of the work having been progressed, and without measuring the impact of services for children.
9. The timeliness and effectiveness of return home interviews for children at risk of exploitation who go missing from home or from care is variable. When return home interviews are carried out and staff have successfully engaged children, the information obtained from them is not always used to support children's planning to help reduce the risk of them going missing again. The intervention and oversight of the child protection manager for vulnerable children adds value to monitoring and interventions, but her involvement relies on the consistency of workers making notifications. This does not consistently happen.

10. Young people who present as homeless at ages 16 and 17 are not provided with a clear understanding of their rights and entitlements, including their options of coming into the care of the local authority. Assessments do not sufficiently focus on the presenting housing issue and are often of insufficient quality to demonstrate that young people's needs have been met. Senior leaders were aware of this prior to inspection and are further developing their protocols with the eight district councils and universal services.
11. Children who are currently privately fostered benefit from regular visits from their social workers. However, assessments of carers do not adequately identify the support that carers might need.
12. All information on children's needs and relevant reports are front-loaded in pre-proceedings, including parenting and viability assessments. This means that work at this threshold is being progressed in a timely way to reduce drift and delay. Letters before proceedings are clear and make explicit to parents what needs to happen for their children, as well as the consequences if progress is not made. Separate agreements for adults help reinforce their responsibilities and outline the plan of action. Where work is effective in pre-proceedings, cases are appropriately de-escalated.
13. The preventing family breakdown team provides a high-quality service and adds significant value by supporting children on the edge of care. The support offers intensive help to children and their families and the involvement of a clinical psychologist. This outcome-focused planning helps children to safely remain in the care of their families.

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

14. The support and services provided to children in care and care leavers in Derbyshire require improvement. Although children in care receive a good service, care leavers receive much less effective support. Care leavers who met with inspectors were almost universally critical of the support provided to them. They identified concerns about the availability of their leaving care workers, as well as their accommodation, independence support and pathway planning.
15. Services for care leavers in Derbyshire have been provided through a commissioned arrangement for the last 12 years. The local authority transferred the service in-house in July 2019, after attempts to improve the quality of the service from the commissioned provider proved unsuccessful. Following widespread consultation with care leavers and a comprehensive service review, the new service provides a secure basis for a streamlined and coordinated service for care leavers and there are early signs of some improvements. However, it is too early to demonstrate positive impact, as this service was only just launched at the time of the inspection.

16. In too many cases, assessments, pathway plans and record-keeping for care leavers are not of good enough quality. Their written assessment and plans are poor, with little or no analysis and no clear plan for achieving independence or for how young people will be supported. There are examples of there not being a clear enough plan that identified or addressed care leavers' presenting vulnerabilities. Risk assessments are not always updated in sufficient time to reflect changes in care leavers' circumstances. Some better assessment and plans were clearly visible in a few cases when they had been completed with the young person and when they had a focus on their emotional well-being.
17. Leaders have invested in re-commissioning and increasing suitable accommodation and support for care leavers. As a result of this, performance in relation to the percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation is much improved, and consultation with care leavers indicates that the majority live in accommodation that meets their needs well. Nevertheless, challenges remain, and inspectors saw a very small number of care leavers with very complex and challenging needs, who, as a result of placement breakdown and/or other complexities, were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation. Although these children were receiving support, such arrangements are unsuitable. This is acknowledged by the local authority.
18. Most children come into care in a timely way, either planned or when risks make it unsafe for them to remain with their parents. They benefit from living with their extended family, or in foster or residential care according to their individual needs.
19. Children in care build positive relationships with dedicated social workers, who spend time getting to know them. Social workers are aspirational for children and support them to achieve their best, and to develop their interests and independence skills to help them to make progress while in care. Children have access to a range of activities and opportunities that enable them to enjoy life and improve their experiences. They are supported to be involved in a range of social activities that help them to feel a part of their community and build their confidence.
20. Permanence is planned for children from an early stage. Social workers are supported by the permanence and adoption team to explore all options for children. Permanence timeliness has improved, and children are appropriately tracked to ensure that there is no drift. When viability and special guardianship order assessments are completed, these are timely and of a high quality. The support plans are child-focused and identify the right levels of need for children and their carers.
21. Children's views matter to their social workers, who work hard to build their trust. Social workers often visit children more frequently than identified in

their care plans, including those children living at a distance. This is assisted by manageable caseloads for social workers. There are examples of some exceptional, sensitive and creative direct work with young people, which helps them to express their views and understand the complexities of their circumstances.

22. Some children have experienced several moves before they are able to be offered homes which meet their needs for stability and security, and this reflects the local authority's sufficiency challenges. When social workers assess and identify that children's needs are not matched well to their current carers, they are proactive in identifying appropriate matches for children. Brothers and sisters are supported to stay together, and social workers are persistent in making sure that children maintain family links and relationships.
23. The virtual school is responsive and quick to ensure that children receive education that enhances their opportunity to learn. Social workers are positive about the support that children receive from the virtual school and report that staff are approachable and offer them expert advice. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from specialist advice about education. Virtual school workers help children to access education at the earliest opportunity. However, targets for the timely completion of personal education plans (PEPs) for children new to care are consistently missed.
24. Children's care plans are updated at each review meeting and these mostly reflect their circumstances, risks and needs. Reviews and meetings are timely and well attended by the agencies that are known to the child. Children are encouraged to attend or give their views, and these are recorded in the review minutes. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) oversight of case notes and meetings with children is evident on children's records. However, the language in some of the recording of IRO meeting notes is not always child-focused.
25. The majority of children receive timely support with their emotional health and well-being. However, for a few children, this is delayed, so they are not getting the help that they need when they need it, and this does not help to support placement stability. The majority of children are not having timely initial health assessments when they first come into care and while review health assessments are more consistently completed, this means that children are not having all their health needs identified at the earliest opportunity. Senior managers know about this and have identified the factors that have led to this recent deterioration in performance. Implementation plans to improve their timeliness include a re-designed health pathway and processes, alongside an additional medical adviser post to support capacity. These changes are not yet demonstrating impact on practice.
26. Following comprehensive care planning, children returning to live with their parents on a care order have improved experiences. Children and their

parents have the right support services in place, with appropriate oversight from their IRO. Children are seen and visited regularly by their social workers to monitor and check their progress.

27. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Derbyshire receive an excellent and responsive service to meet their needs. They benefit from being in care, and, after settling in, start to make good progress. They live in stable homes with carers who support them in all aspects of their lives.
28. The local authority fostering service is a strength, and foster carers state that they feel well supported and respected as professionals, and they speak very highly of the supervising social workers. The fostering panel is effective and is chaired by an experienced panel chair who works to high standards. While agency decision-making is timely and well considered, there is more work to do to tighten and improve placement matching.
29. Adoption timeliness for children has shown sustained improvement since 2017, and adopters are positive about the services and help they receive. Life appreciation days are held for every child, and this provides adopters with the opportunity to meet with significant people in their child's life and enhances their knowledge of children's life histories. Adoption workers go to extraordinary lengths to facilitate this impressive service. The staff from Derbyshire who are now part of the Regional Adoption Agency (Adoption East Midlands) are experienced, knowledgeable and long-serving. They bring a wide knowledge base, skill and experience to the service, and they continue to feel supported through regular supervision and peer support through Adoption East Midlands.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is: good**

30. Following the last inspection of children's services in 2013, a large scale restructure led to a substantial reduction in leadership and managerial roles at all levels. Combined with a prolonged period of considerable instability across the workforce, this led to a significant deterioration in the quality of services for children. After her appointment in 2016, the DCS acted to identify priorities for improvement and increase capacity in the service. Senior managers have successfully secured the support of two successive and different political administrations, following local elections in 2017. This led to some early investment and more recently significant financial reinvestment in the service, and substantial increase in leadership and management capacity. This has enabled the creation of a stable, permanent leadership team that demonstrates determination to deliver improvements in services for children.
31. Although services are not yet consistently good, the impact of strategic leaders on delivering widescale improvement is evident. They have worked

purposefully to ensure investment and to remodel the service, building new structures and increasing capacity, including the creation of 80 additional social work posts. The size and the complexity of the county, combined with a substantial increase in demand, have meant that it has taken time to build these strong foundations. The restructure of the service is beginning to show early signs of improvements, for example through the creation of the practice supervisor role, which provides additional supervisory capacity. Social workers are universally positive about the benefits this is beginning to bring, helping them to feel better supported.

32. Staff report positively on the changes in structure and in teams across the six geographical localities. They feel well supported and are signed up to the chosen model of social work practice. Caseloads have reduced overall, but for a minority of social workers, they remain higher than the target set by the local authority. Leaders are committed to resolving this, and ensure diligent oversight, with rigorous performance management, of this area of work. This results in leaders taking appropriate action to target resources where they are most needed.
33. During the transition phase of the re-structure, movement of staff affected the stability of some teams, leading to inevitable changes in social workers for some children. This is particularly visible in the disabled children's service, where staff turnover impacted on the quality of support provided for some children and their families. Senior managers recognised this challenge prior to the inspection, and implemented incremental change to help reduce the negative impact for children.
34. Senior managers have remained focused on practice through periods of change and have continued oversight of existing services that are providing good services to children. This includes a strong fostering and adoption service, the virtual school, the specialist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children's service and the preventing family breakdown team. The child protection manager for vulnerable children is very valuable to the investigation of children at risk of exploitation, and allows a strategic view of exploitation across Derbyshire, including a neighbouring local authority. This suitably aids disruption and the identification of gang activity and hotspots. The recent launch of a revised child exploitation toolkit has been implemented in practice and is being used effectively by social workers to determine levels of risk.
35. There are good governance arrangements in place that enable senior leaders to assure themselves that the Regional Adoption Agency (Adoption East Midlands) delivers well for Derbyshire's children. The RAA formally came into operation on 1 April 2019 and its development has been led by the DCS in Derbyshire on behalf of the region.

36. Leaders have a sound understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement across the service. They are outward-facing, seeking to learn from the wider sector. They are thoughtful and considered in their approach, using external scrutiny and support to test whether the changes they are embedding are having the right impact. An example of this is the Local Government Association review which took place in April 2019, tasked to assess the effectiveness of the changes made to child protection practice following the focused visit in 2018.
37. A well-developed, effective performance and quality assurance framework ensures that leaders have an accurate knowledge and understanding of front-line practice. Performance information and reporting is extensive and enables senior managers to measure the effectiveness of service delivery. Audit activity is sophisticated, providing comprehensive oversight of practice, informed by the views of practitioners, children and parents. Activity is triangulated, including through strengthened quality assurance oversight of IROs and child protection chairs.
38. 'Closing the loop' audits help to embed learning and test progress against identified actions. More recent audits identify that the quality of practice and management oversight across the service is steadily improving. Following the substantial restructure in April 2019, some weaknesses in frontline management oversight are still evident, and many managers, practice supervisors and social workers are new to their roles. Leaders are alert to these issues, ensuring tight oversight of the work. The effectiveness of quality assurance and performance management across the service ensures that senior leaders have tight scrutiny and oversight. This provides a safety net for weaker operational management oversight, which helps to prevent a deterioration in practice.
39. Significantly, the leadership team quickly recognised that the service provided to care leavers had declined following a change in management oversight in the outsourced service in late 2017. They took rigorous action to assess the impact, including commissioning an independent review and seeking extensive consultation with care leavers. The service transferred in-house in July 2019, when the commissioned provider was unable to improve the quality of service, despite a range of improvement actions. The transition to the new service has been diligently and sensitively managed, and leaders have an ambitious, but realistic plan, for service improvement.
40. Care leavers participating in the care leavers council report positively about being able to contribute to the recruitment of social care staff. They are proud to have been part of the consultation on care leaver services, resulting in changes to service delivery. The six-monthly 'big conversation' for children in care and care leavers is a very positive opportunity that has resulted in action being taken on care leavers concerns, such as free bus passes and council tax exemption. Not all district councils are signed up to council tax

exemptions, so this is not equitable for young people across the county. Senior leaders are making steady progress to change this and have been effective in seeking agreement to sign up to council tax exemption from most district councils.

41. The lead member for children's services, supported by senior managers, has acted to strengthen the corporate parenting function, which has moved from a committee arrangement to a board. This is improving the contribution of partner agencies, and their accountability as corporate parents. While work has commenced to increase the participation of children in care and care leavers, it is still too early to assess the impact.
42. There are challenges in the sufficiency of some placements for children in care. Leaders have a clear understanding of their sufficiency needs and have developed a comprehensive strategy and plan, following consultation with the children in care council and care leavers and partnership working with the Dartington research unit in 2016–18. This has resulted in the innovative development of a new children's home with a focus on supporting children with significant emotional well-being and mental health difficulties. This is already successful in improving outcomes for children.
43. Leaders of the virtual school are held to account, not only by the local authority's corporate parenting board, but also by a governance board reflecting a wide range of backgrounds, and including young people. Levels of exclusion for children in care have fallen over the last two years, and the percentage of children who are persistently absent from school is also beginning to fall. A dedicated virtual school lead for post-16 students and a programme of senior local authority post holders acting as mentors to individuals illustrate the commitment to supporting individuals' aspirations as corporate parents. Peer and creative mentoring programmes enable young people to develop the personal and social skills and confidence to help themselves as they transition into adulthood and the world beyond school.
44. Senior leaders are visible and know what is happening across services. They make time to listen to staff, for example during 'show me tell me' and challenge days. They have clear expectations of what to expect from the quality of social work practice and supervision. Their vision and investment in the practice supervisor role to enhance the skills and support of frontline workers, while in the early days in development, is starting to have a positive impact, and is giving an additional oversight of practice. The leadership focus is on sustainable, widescale change to improve children's outcomes, and this is showing signs of affecting good progress across the service.



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