

# Leeds

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 29 October 2018 to 2 November 2018**

**Lead inspector: Matt Reed**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

Children and families in Leeds are receiving a consistently good service which ensures that their needs are met at the right time by the right service. Well-established multi-agency partnerships aim to meet the needs of children and families at the lowest level of intervention. A clear focus on providing support at the earliest opportunity is helping families to make changes before concerns increase. Leaders have established a well-understood practice model that promotes child-centred work and productive working relationships between workers and families, as well as giving a clear overview of the outcomes desired. The local authority is a committed corporate parent that is ambitious for its children, that encourages children to realise their potential and that celebrates their achievements. The care leavers' service has recently become a distinct service to facilitate greater focus on their outcomes and improve access to education and employment.

The leadership team has a clear and ambitious vision for what it wishes to achieve for the children of Leeds. Substantial progress has been made in delivering this vision to make Leeds a child-friendly city. Children are placed at the centre of

work within the city and strong multi-agency strategic partnerships are promoting effective practice among their practitioners. Leaders are committed to continuous improvement, invite feedback and engage in innovations to further enhance services. This is reflected in an accurate self-evaluation and improvement plan, focusing not just on successes but also on areas where further work is required. There has been investment in the effective recruitment and development of staff, facilitating a more experienced and stable workforce that is very loyal to Leeds and highly motivated to provide the best service it can to children and families. Social work practice and leadership in Leeds is consistently good as a result. While some processes are not fully effective, children and young people are safeguarded and supported to achieve good outcomes.

### **What needs to improve**

- The consistent involvement of health agencies in strategy discussions.
- The consideration given to children's culture and identity in all assessments.
- The quality, recording and review of personal education plans (PEPs) so that they provide clear, consistent and purposeful targets, covering both short- and longer-term objectives.
- Pathway planning to be better reflected in case records and pathway plans to be reviewed to ensure that they are meaningful documents for young people.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Outstanding**

1. Children and families benefit from a well-established and well-resourced 'cluster' model of early help which appropriately meets many children's needs at the lowest formal level of intervention. Children needing more intensive support have their needs identified quickly and well and can access a wide range of services, including consistently good social work support. The commitment to early help is tangible, with a strong belief that solutions to many problems can be found from within the family. Leeds local authority has invested in a range of services, including multi-systemic therapy (MST) and family group conferencing to facilitate problem-solving by the family themselves. This is helping to prevent concerns escalating and diverting children away from more formal child protection procedures, ensuring that issues are resolved with the least intrusive intervention.
2. The local authority has maintained a network of children's centres across the city. This helps to ensure that families are offered support when needs are first identified. The early help support has been further enhanced by the

introduction of the Restorative Early Support (RES) teams who work intensively with families, setting clear goals that are reviewed weekly. Utilising restorative principles, families 'own' the plan promoting sustainable change. The work seen in the RES teams demonstrated intensive intervention with families, who are maintaining change and preventing the escalation of concerns. These teams include social workers and support workers and provide an effective interface between the early help and statutory services, either by preventing the escalation of concerns or by providing longer-term support to families that no longer need a statutory intervention.

3. Leeds local authority have well-established multi-agency arrangements at the 'front door'. These have replaced the traditional model of thresholds and rely on professionals having the 'right conversation at the right time' to enable families to access services that meet their needs. This approach is well understood across the multi-agency partnership and professionals know when to refer matters to children's social work services (CSWS). The quality of information on contacts made by partner agencies is too variable. A few had too little detail and were unclear about why the contact had been made. Clear and effective management oversight ensured that this did not detract from contacts being progressed in a timely way. An efficient system in the multi-agency front door enables contacts to be signposted to the right service at the earliest opportunity, proportionate to the level of presented needs. The workers in the 'front door' share information well to ensure that decisions are informed and there is clear management oversight of this process. A weekly referrals meeting chaired by the head of service facilitates further scrutiny and challenge of the referrals progressed in order to ensure that decisions are appropriate.
4. Work regarding domestic abuse and the effect it has on children is a clear strength of the local authority and the issues are well understood across the partnership. The daily Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) meeting within the front door supports robust multi-agency information-sharing and response to higher level domestic violence incidents. This reduces delay in families receiving a more detailed assessment of risk and access to services. There are robust responses to the risks to children, including such risks as sexual exploitation and going missing. There is also evidence of the effective use of safety plans and risk assessment tools that guide practitioners in their work to reduce the level of concern and minimise the risks to young people.
5. Immediate and increasing risk to children is well recognised and matters escalate appropriately into statutory social work services. However, the quality of strategy discussions is inconsistent. While the police are involved in strategy discussions, the participation of health partners is inconsistent. This restricts the information received and discussed and reduces the ability to reach agreement on the next steps. Despite this, no children were seen to be at risk, appropriate decisions were made, and immediate actions were taken

to ensure a timely response to the concerns raised. Subsequent investigations were sufficiently detailed, involved the appropriate partners and children were safeguarded while further assessment and investigation was completed.

6. Relationship-based practice is a clear feature of the work in Leeds, children are allocated a social worker in a timely way and, wherever possible, they remain with the same social worker throughout the family involvement. This facilitates the development of trusting relationships and reduces the number of professionals in the family's life. Social workers know their children well, and children are seen regularly and seen alone. Recording of visits is detailed, with clear observations and ongoing analysis to maintain focus on the overall outcomes to be achieved. There is evidence of purposeful direct work with children to ascertain their views and gain an understanding of their lives, and this is assisting in creating and maintaining good relationships.
7. Assessments seen were generally of a good quality. They were detailed, with a clear analysis of risk based on a consideration of history balanced against current concerns. However, there is not always mention of ethnicity and diversity issues, and this limits a full understanding of the child and family's circumstances. Partner agencies contributed effectively to assessments and subsequent plans, resulting in efficient targeting of resources to meet identified needs and achieve the desired outcomes for the family.
8. Children's plans from early help to children protection are detailed and well coordinated and they are reviewed on a regular basis to minimise drift in achieving identified outcomes. The restorative approach that has been adopted by the local authority facilitates working 'with' a family rather than 'doing to', and constructive dialogue with families and professionals ensures that plans are progressed in a timely way and that children are safeguarded.
9. There is good management oversight of work to ensure that plans are progressed and that identified needs are met in a timely way. Social workers in Leeds receive regular supervision, which is recorded on the case file. However, the recording of supervision is not consistent, and is quite often brief, with limited evidence of reflective discussions to inform next steps. Social workers stated that they feel well supported and described managers as being available for advice and guidance.
10. The Public Law Outline (PLO) is being used effectively when risks increase, and more proactive action is needed. Proactive work in the PLO process ensures that assessments are 'front loaded', and this is helping to effect change and facilitate timely planning should the matter need to progress to the court arena. The Decision and Review Panel (DARP) ensures that there is clear management oversight and review of this process, enabling timely planning to ensure that children are safeguarded without delay.

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

11. The local authority is committed to a framework of restorative practice and working with families to effect change. Children are supported to remain at home wherever possible. However, when they need to come into care they do so in a timely way, based on their best interests and assessed need.
12. Applications to court are appropriate and supported by good-quality statements and plans. All court work is quality assured by a specialist case manager, which was noted by local judiciary to be driving forward and maintaining high standards of work. When legal proceedings are initiated, they are progressed in a timely way, which supports early permanence decisions and reduces the uncertainty for children regarding their long-term living arrangements. Family members are appropriately assessed, and the local authority has an increasing number of kinship carers, enabling children to remain within their extended family wherever possible.
13. When children are unable to live within their extended family, they are supported to maintain relationships with significant others by suitable arrangements for contact. Wherever it is safe to do so, children are supported to return to live with their parents. Against local trends, leaders have maintained investment in the family drug and alcohol court (FDAC) to support this work for families in court proceedings. Further work via the Multi-Systemic Therapy Family Intervention Team or reunification work reduces the risk of further breakdown and periods of care for children. Where reunification is not possible, permanence in all other forms is considered, progressed in a timely way and monitored via the permanence panel. Early permanence planning and good links with One Adoption West Yorkshire, the regional adoption agency, are ensuring that children are placed and supported with adoptive families in a timely way.
14. Children in care are listened to, they are seen alone, and their wishes and feelings are acted on by social workers, who are consistent people in their lives and keen advocates for them. Direct work supports young people to help them understand their life histories and the reasons why they are in care. Positive outcomes are promoted through good-quality care plans, which are updated and reviewed on a regular basis. Independent Reviewing Officers ensure that children are seen and supported to contribute to their review and to influence planning.
15. When children come into care, they are given a pack, developed with the 'Have a Voice' (HAV) council, which represents children in care in Leeds. The pack explains children's rights and gives information on how to share ideas and make complaints. Children in care and care leavers have access to advocacy. Their complaints are taken seriously and have had an influence on

service improvement, for example through the development of a leaflet explaining placement moves and decisions regarding contact with parents.

16. The local authority regularly consults with the HAV and care leavers council, which are encouraged and supported to promote the views of children. The children and young people seen stated that they feel listened to and were able to articulate where they have made a difference, giving the examples of the corporate grandparent scheme for children of care leavers and obtaining smart phones for personal advisors in order to facilitate easier contact. Young people are involved in the recruitment of staff at all levels in the local authority. They have access to the head of service and director of children's services via 'The Promise', which the young people spoke positively about.
17. Children are encouraged to keep themselves safe and there is an effective multi-agency approach to addressing risks such as sexual exploitation and going missing. Safety planning and risk meetings ensure that risks are reduced, tracked and monitored over time to ensure that change is sustained. Return home interviews are comprehensive and enable an understanding of the reasons why children go missing.
18. As a city, Leeds celebrates the achievements of children in care and care leavers and is suitably ambitious for their future. Children in care and care leavers are encouraged to pursue interests and have access to activities that broaden their life experiences. Children in care and care leavers are encouraged to achieve their potential and there is a clear commitment to improving educational outcomes. Attendance is well monitored to ensure that children in care access education on a regular basis and have every opportunity to achieve educationally. There is a clear strategic priority to improve the educational outcomes for children in care, especially in the primary years. The virtual school sets high expectations and targets intervention appropriately. Pupil premium funding is spent well and is scrutinised using performance trackers and Personal Education Plans (PEPs) to ensure that it is demonstrating impact and assisting children to make progress. However, PEPs are variable in quality, with inconsistent use of the current format. Until recently, it was a requirement that all PEPs were reviewed in accordance with the statutory requirements, twice a year. A new process was put in place in September 2018 to ensure that pupils whose needs require more intensive support will have their PEPs reviewed on a termly basis.
19. Children are encouraged to keep themselves healthy, and their health needs are reviewed regularly. There is a comprehensive offer to young people and carers in relation to accessing support for mental health and emotional well-being, and this is a service strength. The MINDMATE website has been developed with young people and assists in signposting them to services and support. General practitioners have a single access point for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Support Services (CAMHS), in addition to the cluster

network of support to schools. The therapeutic social work team, with support from clinical psychologists, further enhances the response to mental health needs by offering direct intervention to the young person or providing advice to the allocated worker. This reduces delays in children being able to access the support required to meet their needs and is leading to positive outcomes for most children who access this service.

20. An integrated health team provides support to care leavers. While all care leavers are offered a copy of their health passports, there is no system in place to monitor who accepts this and whether all care leavers fully understand their health needs as they approach independence.
21. Leeds local authority is committed to meeting the needs of the children in care, and the vast majority of children in care are in local placements or live nearby and have access to the same supports. Most children live in foster placements and the local authority has been successful in recruiting and supporting a number of foster carers to develop skills and increase the range of placements available. There is a targeted recruitment drive to attract foster carers in order to meet current demand, especially carers who are able to meet the needs of older children, disabled children and sibling groups. However, there remains a gap in available placements for older children and children with more complex needs.
22. Leeds has 10 children's homes, including a secure children's home. Issues with two homes have culminated in their temporary closure, resulting in a small number of children experiencing poor-quality care and instability due to short-term placement moves while more long-term placements are found. The local authority is taking appropriate action to address the shortfalls in its residential provision in order to improve the general environment and care received by young people requiring this type of provision.
23. The majority of foster carers reported being well supported, and the establishment of the Mockingbird hubs is creating support networks among foster carers and further enhancing the support available and promoting placement stability. There is an established foster care association that supports carers and provides an interface with senior managers to resolve issues.
24. Through accurate self-evaluation, leaders have identified the need for improvement in its care leaver service and have taken steps to strengthen management and service delivery. The care leavers' service has recently become a distinct service as part of this plan. Personal assistants are providing consistent and effective support to care leavers and there is evidence of persistence in maintaining contact with young people. Personal assistants know their young people well and help them with a wide range of issues. However, it is not always clear from the records what the focus of work with young people is and how this is assisting them as they move to

independence. Pathway plans are not routinely updated nor reviewed when there are changes in the young person's circumstances. This prevents them from being meaningful documents that young people can engage with to assist with their transition into independence.

25. Children leaving care have access to a range of accommodation options and are supported to live independently. The local authority has had success in encouraging children to stay put with foster carers beyond 18 years old, further facilitating stability in the lives of those young people. It is acknowledged that more needs to be done to improve the numbers of care leavers in education, employment and training, and this is a key focus of the service.

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

26. There is a long-standing commitment and ambition throughout the council to ensure that children are at the centre of work within the city. As a result, vulnerable children, including those with highly complex needs, have received a consistently good service, and significant demographic and funding challenges have been met. The council leader, lead member, chief executive officer and senior leadership team are well informed, set ambitious targets and effectively monitor progress against objectives. Funding for children's services has been maintained, with a clear focus on meeting need at the earliest opportunity to enable children to realise their potential. There is a commitment to community-based support, which is evidenced through the maintenance of children's centres across the city. Strong, enduring and mature strategic partnerships enable a clear focus on the needs of children and families and facilitate solid practice through a shared understanding of the practice model. Working relationships are not just effective among statutory partners, but also with the third sector and business partners as child-friendly ambassadors, increasing and enhancing the opportunities available to young people.
27. The local authority is a learning organisation with a clear vision of what it is seeking to achieve. Senior managers know their services well, which is reflected in an accurate self-evaluation and a recognition of where improvements have been made and where further work is still required. Issues relating to PEPs and improving support to care leavers are known and addressed within 'The Leeds Children and Families Improvement Plan 2018–2020'. There is an unerring commitment to continuous improvement, while the challenges ahead are also recognised.
28. Feedback on services is invited from external bodies, such as the University of Bedfordshire, in relation to the RES teams, and there is active consultation with children and families through a variety of means, including the Youth Council and Voice and Influence team. In addition, the views of parents and

young people sought through interactive practice audits provide direct feedback about the quality of the service they receive. Children and young people are encouraged to be active citizens, and this has had a direct influence on the development of services that are offered to young people in the city. Leeds local authority has been active in sharing its learning and supporting other local authorities as a Partner in Practice. As well as making a strong contribution to sector improvement, this work also further enhances Leeds local authority's own learning and development. The Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) and the local judiciary are very complimentary about the willingness of Leeds local authority to drive improvements in the local courts and assist them in understanding the model of working.

29. Leeds continues to invest in innovative services and new approaches to practice, such as MST-FIT and the Restorative Early Support Teams. Good use is made of council and local partners' investment, as well as Department for Education 'Innovation' funding.
30. There is a clear 'Leeds Practice Model' and a clear identity as a service that has been developed and maintained over an extended period. Restorative practice is well understood by all staff and partners, and the vision set by senior leaders impacts at all levels. The workforce is motivated and committed to ensuring that this is translated into practice with families. A programme of quality assurance, including interactive practice audits, multi-agency thematic audits through the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) and group audits enables a focus on the quality of practice and the impact that it has had children's lives. Leeds has a philosophy of 'high support, high challenge' to drive improvements and encourage the delivery of the best service possible for families.
31. Performance data is monitored regularly and effectively to identify changes in demand and inform leaders about where resources should be targeted. Managers at all levels in the organisation have access to this data, which is used to analyse individual team and wider service performance. Effective liaison with the performance team ensures that the quality of the data is robust and understood. An emphasis on outcomes facilitates consideration not just on the amount of work being done but on the impact that the intervention has had and the difference it has made to families. Reports have a focus on the outcome of the interventions and project what success would look like.
32. A critical strategic priority has been the establishment of a stable workforce. The local authority has invested in practice and career development opportunities, which has supported the effective recruitment and retention of staff. This has been successful, vacancy rates are very low, and a clear majority of workers now have more than two years' experience. Managers are experienced, and more experienced social workers work alongside newly

qualified workers to provide a good balance of experience and support. Having a settled workforce has facilitated effective relationship-based social work. Caseloads are carefully monitored, and while numbers fluctuate, social workers describe their caseloads as manageable and allowing them to build meaningful relationships with children and families.

33. There is a strong workforce development programme that promotes continuous development for all staff, with a focus on improving practice and outcomes for children. There is a clear career structure in which people can progress and they are encouraged to do so. Social workers and managers at all levels are highly committed to Leeds local authority. There is a thorough understanding of the practice model and expectations, and people are motivated to provide the best service they can for children and families.



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