

Dudley

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 29 October 2018 to 9 November 2018

Lead inspector: Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector

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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Significant progress has been made in many areas of children's services in Dudley since the last inspection in 2016. Effective work by senior management and staff, together with commitment and investment by political leaders, has led to improved responses to the needs of children and families. As a result, outcomes for many children and their families are better.

A recognition of the importance of preventative services and considerable joint work with partners has meant that children and families benefit from an effective early help service. If their needs escalate, children receive a considered and timely response from social care. Risk to children is recognised and effective action is taken to minimise that risk. Areas of service identified as inadequate in the last inspection have been turned around and now deliver better quality and more focused and child-centred practice. In particular, this has resulted in good-quality planning for children in care and better long-term outcomes for them. Children who come into care have plans made to safely return them home or to ensure that there are good alternative long-term caring arrangements made for

them, including adoption. When young people leave care, they are well supported by personal advisers.

Some challenges remain, and there are areas of service that require further improvement. A high turnover of staff has had a detrimental impact on the quality of practice, particularly in assessment teams. Plans for children in need or at risk do not always clearly state what actions need to be taken and within what timeframe. Not all young people who are homeless receive assessments that include the possibility of care by the local authority. Some young people have remained in care for longer than they should. The virtual school has not yet ensured that personal education plans for children in care consistently reflect the needs of children and that it has a clear understanding of its own effectiveness. Social workers are not always benefiting from supportive supervision and the opportunity to reflect on complex work.

What needs to improve

- The timeliness of strategy meetings in assessment teams and that all relevant partnership members attend and contribute.
 - That children in need and child protection plans have clear timescales for progress to be made and that these are readily understandable by parents and carers.
 - When children go missing, all are offered and receive a timely return home interview.
 - When young people present as homeless, careful consideration is given as to whether they should come into the care of the local authority and that young people should be clearly told about this option.
 - The timeliness of initial health reviews to support young people's health needs when they come into care.
 - Personal education plans to better reflect the voice of the young person and their progress and needs in education.
 - The virtual school's ability to evaluate the effectiveness of its work and ensure that it has consistent leadership to undertake that work.
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The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Requires improvement to be good

1. There is a well-developed early help offer in Dudley that offers effective services to children and families. Thresholds are closely managed, and, where appropriate, cases step up to social care quickly. Early help assessments undertaken by the local authority and subsequent support plans are well constructed and thorough. Assessments of need undertaken by partners are, however, of a poorer quality and many do not clearly identify the needs of families. The local authority is working with partners to ensure that recently introduced improvement initiatives assist in them completing better early help assessments.
 2. Families with more complex needs benefit from timely decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Decision-making is effective, with good information-sharing between partners, and most decisions are made within 24 hours. Rationale for decisions is well recorded by managers. Thresholds are well understood and applied in most cases and consent is generally sought or is dispensed with appropriately. Child protection concerns are quickly identified and responded to. Strategy meetings are appropriately called and well attended by MASH partners.
 3. For those families needing help at weekends and overnight, the emergency duty team provides effective responses that are recorded well. Decision-making is appropriate and timely.
 4. Referrals passed on to the assessment team receive a less well-coordinated and timely response. Not all children are seen quickly enough after their cases have been allocated. Some of these delays are due to a high turnover of staff. Most social workers know the children they work with well and seek and record their views. In many cases, social workers work directly with children using a variety of tools to help explore their concerns and experiences. Assessments are mostly of good quality and are comprehensive, with reference to previous history. Recommendations for further work stem from an appropriate analysis of needs.
 5. Strategy discussions in assessment teams are not of such good quality as those seen in the MASH. The rationale for decision-making is not always fully recorded, and information from partners is not always as detailed as it should be. Some discussions are delayed because of a lack of police availability and this results in a very small number of cases not being progressed to initial case conferences (ICPC) quickly enough. In these cases, children are not receiving a sufficiently consistent response when concerns are escalated following allocation for assessment, although this was not seen to have had a detrimental effect on individual children.
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6. The last inspection recommended that there should be a more focused approach to issues of neglect. In response, the local authority introduced the use of the graded care profile tool to measure progress in such cases. As yet, it is not fully embedded in social work practice. Some use of the tool was seen in early help cases, but it was not used effectively to measure progress or inform action plans. No evidence was seen of this resulting in delays for children, but this remains a risk.
 7. Case conferences are well attended by a range of partners, who contribute to the assessment of risk and need. Subsequent children in need and child protection plans are inconsistent in quality. Better plans are focused on improvement delivery and result in risks to children reducing. Poorer plans are not specific enough about actions, timescales or what is to be achieved. In a few cases, brothers and sisters are grouped together with insufficient attention paid to individual needs. This means that in some cases, individual progress is hard to measure and increases the risk of drift. While many core groups ensure progression of plans, plans are not updated following core groups because of IT system limitations. This makes progress more difficult to see and measure.
 8. Children living with domestic abuse receive a prompt and appropriate response, with a range of support offered to victims and perpetrators. This increases parents' and carers' understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on children and what must change to keep children safe.
 9. When the needs of children escalate, pre-proceedings work is timely, with clear recognition of risk and what needs to happen to reduce risk to children. In some instances, poor-quality letters before proceedings mean that some families are not told clearly enough what needs to change or within what timescale changes need to be made.
 10. The creation of the Adolescent Response Team has ensured that plans of intervention for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation or who go missing and those at the edge of care are well focused. A wide range of resources and direct work have led to a reduction in risky behaviours for a number of young people. Multi-agency sexual abuse (MASE) meetings that include young people, parents and carers result in a shared understanding of risks and what needs to change to reduce risks to children. Not enough return home interviews (RHIs) are carried out with children who have been missing, and some young people are not offered RHIs. This means that it is more difficult to understand the reasons why they go missing and to offer the right support or preventative services.
 11. Social work practice in the disability team is a strength, with effective multi-agency work in progressing plans. Disabled children benefit from good levels of support and skills, particularly those who are non-verbal. Risk is recognised and acted on in a timely manner.
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12. The vulnerability of a small number of young people is not always recognised. Young people aged 16 and 17 presenting as homeless are not always receiving information about the option to become looked after or being assessed as needing care when they are referred to the local authority. This means that some young people do not have the benefit of the most suitable alternative caring arrangements or the provision of support after leaving care.
13. Dudley local authority is active in identifying private fostering arrangements and raising awareness across other service providers in the borough. Private fostering assessments are timely and demonstrate appropriate understanding and application of thresholds, decision-making, policy and procedure. Social workers make sure that children are spoken to alone and that their voices are heard.
14. The designated officer service is ensuring that high volumes of enquiries are being dealt with effectively. Positions of trust meetings are held appropriately. Decision-making is timely and ensures that investigations progress and that children are safeguarded. The service is active in training agencies and schools across Dudley in the management of allegations.
15. Supervision, although regular, is inconsistent in its quality. While the recording of supervision in most cases sets out clear actions, these lack timescales and reflection on work. Supervision does not always help social workers understand complex problems or how to progress children's plans.

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

16. Appropriate and timely decisions are made for most children to come into care in Dudley local authority when they can no longer live with their families safely. A small number of children experience delays in care proceedings commencing when their circumstances at home have not improved. Once care proceedings commence, evidence is prepared and filed promptly, and the quality of court work is thorough and rigorous. The designated family judge is complimentary about the progress made by Dudley local authority in the standard of their evidence and reports. When children have a plan to return home, assessment of risk and preparation is thorough and ensures the best chance of successful and safe rehabilitation.
 17. Most children are placed in suitable permanent placements at the earliest opportunity. The operation of an early permanence panel ensures timely consideration of permanence options for children. Permanence options, including placements with connected persons, special guardianship orders (SGOs) and long-term fostering placements are all explored. Assessments are well written and focused on the long-term needs of children.
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18. Children entering care do not receive timely initial health assessments. There are significant fluctuations in performance, with, on average, just under half being completed in the required time in the first seven months of 2018. Despite a review, the local authority has not yet improved or established the reasons for underperformance.
 19. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) are supported well and are appropriately accommodated under section 20 arrangements. They live in stable homes and receive a range of support. This includes access to interpreters, explanations of rights and entitlements and help to learn English. There is an awareness of their emotional, religious and cultural needs. This includes support to visit the local Mosque for those who are Muslim and introductions to other UASC who speak the same language, so that they build friendships to reduce their isolation.
 20. Life-story books compiled by a dedicated life worker in the adoption service are of a high standard. However, those started by children in care teams are not always timely or of the same standard. Adopted children are provided with clear but sensitively written later life letters to help them understand the circumstances that led to their being adopted.
 21. The majority of children live in stable and secure placements. They live in, or close to, Dudley. Most long-term fostering placements are matched, including children placed with independent fostering agency carers. Prospective foster carers undergo thorough and evaluative assessments, supporting good matches when they are approved. Fostering panel minutes do not, however, demonstrate the reasons for recommendations concerning foster carer approvals and recommended matches of children. Agency decision-maker decisions are not always made quickly enough following panel recommendations.
 22. Foster carers value the support provided by their supervising social workers and highly regard a comprehensive training programme that helps them to improve their knowledge and skills throughout their period of service. SGO and connected person carers are also well supported. Some foster carers experience delays in getting a response to their queries or concerns from children's social workers and find this frustrating and unhelpful.
 23. Children's care plans are regularly reviewed and updated by their social workers, ensuring that both current and emerging needs are recognised and addressed. Some actions are not specific and time bound and this results in delays to resolving some issues promptly. Reviews for children looked after are held regularly. Efforts are made to involve children and to present their views. Most meetings are attended by an appropriate range of agencies. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) scrutinise the progress of children's care plans and challenge shortfalls when important objectives for children are delayed. Contact with children's families of origin is
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carefully reviewed to ensure that it remains child-centred rather than adult-focused, and any difficulties or sensitivities arising for children are closely explored. The holding of regular IRO mid-point reviews is good practice and is an important additional check and balance on the progress of children's care plans. This also reduces the impact of any delay.

24. Too many children unnecessarily remain on care orders at home, some for periods of many years. This is a contributing factor to the significantly high rate of children in care in Dudley. While parents, team managers, social workers and IROs often question the continuing suitability of these care orders, management action to review these cases has been too slow.
 25. Children are seen individually by their social workers and their specific needs are well understood and addressed. Social workers enable children to discuss sensitive issues and feelings. Trusting relationships are in many cases established and most social workers have relationships with children which are meaningful.
 26. Management oversight is regular and influential in helping social workers progress care plans and reflect on difficult issues for children, such as their contact arrangements. Clear actions and timescales are set for further work. Recording is clear.
 27. Nearly all children in care attend good or outstanding schools. Educational achievement for children looked after in Dudley is better than the national average at key stages 2 and 4. However, the quality of personal education plans is inconsistent, with a lack of commentary in many and the voice of the child not always apparent. The virtual school only put in place a system to collect a baseline set of data to enable it to monitor and evaluate progress for pupils in the summer of 2018. This is despite weak measuring and tracking of progress being noted at the previous inspection. Currently, the virtual school cannot reliably or accurately measure its impact on children in care.
 28. The children in care council has been re-vitalised since the last inspection. It features a lively and committed group of young people who work very hard and effectively to raise the positive profile of children in care. Children know how to access support from independent advocates if they wish to.
 29. The adoption service is a strength. Children are considered for adoption at the earliest opportunity. They benefit from good-quality child permanence reports that help them to understand their life stories and history. Children and adopters benefit from effective family finding and matching and are well supported by experienced adoption practitioners. Adopters benefit from good-quality assessments and adopters report that they are fair and accurate. The adoption panel is effective, with a consistent and
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knowledgeable chair, while the agency decision-maker's decisions are timely and robust.

30. Adopters benefit from good pre- and post-approval training that helps them to develop a good understanding of the needs of adopted children. Adopters speak positively about all aspects of the adoption service. They are supported to access a range of effective adoption support services once a child is placed and an adoption order is made, which helps to support placement stability. There is an active fostering to adopt process within the local authority, with three placements made in the last six months. In a few cases, adopters have experienced some delays in preparation and assessment processes because of issues with social work capacity and medical delays. The authority is taking action to reduce these delays.
 31. Young people leaving care benefit from dedicated personal advisers (PAs), who know them well. PAs demonstrate vigilant oversight of the whereabouts of care leavers and make every attempt to locate them to ensure that they are safe. The service is in contact with all but five young people. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive local offer that they helped to design and put together.
 32. PAs make persistent attempts to engage young people in education employment and training (EET) and enable them to access a range of appropriate help and advice from other professionals through a weekly drop in-facility. Local data reports 47.6% of care leavers aged 19–21 are not in EET, which is better than statistical neighbours and the West Midlands average. Dudley supports young people to succeed in higher education, with 18 young people currently at university. A further eight young people have secured apprenticeships.
 33. The quality of care leaver pathway plans is inconsistent, and they do not fully capture all the risks that care leavers may be exposed to. While recording in young people's cases is not consistently of good quality, the strong relationship they have with PAs means that progress is prevented of the plans to meet their needs. Care leavers benefit from a staying-put option with former foster carers and have access to a range of accommodation options. The vast majority of care leavers (96%) live in suitable accommodation where they feel safe. Some care leavers have had several accommodation moves and are living outside of the area, which reduces their accessibility to support services. Not all care leavers have all their health history information.
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The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is: Good

34. The local authority has made significant progress in improving the quality of services to children and families since its last inspection in 2016. Almost all the recommendations for improvement made at the last inspection have been acted on. Senior leaders and elected members are ambitious and have made progress in improving outcomes for children. The chief officer has been instrumental in achieving change. Despite financial pressures, there is a commitment to children's services and a focus on ensuring the well-being, safety and improved outcomes of children in the borough.
 35. Challenges remain. The workforce profile remains fragile, with high numbers of agency workers, although some have worked for the local authority for a long time. However, at times turnover of staff has been high. This is despite the local authority's continued efforts to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of social workers and managers. The adverse impact of workforce churn is seen in some assessments and in the slow progress of some child protection and CIN plans. The vulnerability of a very small number of young people is not always fully assessed. The virtual school is not yet fully effective, with inconsistencies in the quality of personal education plans and a lack of self-evaluation. Senior managers understand many of these issues, but further work remains to ensure that all services for children are good.
 36. To address the need for further improvement and in an effort to make Dudley an attractive place to work, managers have strengthened the structure of children's services with the creation of the Centre for Professional Practice. This centre ensures a positive first experience of social work for newly qualified staff, many of whom stay on to work in Dudley. The setting up of an adolescent response team and a court team has ensured that there are focused areas of specialised practice. These changes have significantly improved practice in care proceedings, work with children on the edge of care and support in complex cases.
 37. The local authority has developed a quality assurance system and performance information database which now enables it to measure and track practice and performance with greater accuracy. This improvement means that senior leaders and managers are now aware of where further progress is required and whether targets are being met. Despite this, the local authority has not acted quickly enough to ensure that poor performance in undertaking initial health assessments for children entering care has been remedied. The local authority has plans to implement a more user-friendly and reliable electronic case record system, but currently social workers spend too much time negotiating a system that is unwieldy and difficult to use.
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38. Strategic partnerships are strong, with cohesive borough-wide responses to concerns over the growth of gangs and impact on vulnerable young people. The strategic response to children who go missing and those at risk of child sexual exploitation is well coordinated. The individual response to young people at risk of child sexual exploitation is often strong. Further benefits could be derived from an analysis of intelligence provided by increased volumes of RHIs.
 39. The local authority and partners have been responsive to the risks associated with criminal exploitation, gang affiliations and serious youth violence. Several initiatives have been put in place to manage risk. These include a multi-agency risk assessment panel looking at individual cases and the targeting of young people through a prevention project going round schools in parts of the borough where it is known that gang activity is prominent.
 40. There is good partnership engagement with a well-developed early help offer and a comprehensive and updated early help strategy. The strategic partnership has maintained a robust overview of the effectiveness of early help and recognises the need to strengthen partners' understanding of thresholds. It has ensured partner engagement in a comprehensive training programme to promote a greater understanding of the roles that all agencies have in ensuring high-quality preventative services.
 41. The local authority has a positive relationship with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and a good reputation with the local judiciary. Applications for court orders are timely and social work statements are of a high quality. This helps to secure early permanence.
 42. The authority has not ensured that there is sufficient capacity to visit families to make checks on the safety or progress of the majority of pupils who are educated at home. It is only able to visit those with identified safeguarding issues. This is concerning as there is a potential for children to be at risk of harm.
 43. Corporate parenting has been strengthened. A renewed strategy is more closely aligned with the pledge to care leavers and indicates a greater responsiveness to the voices of children in care and care leavers. The board receives regular performance information and other reports. The children in care council has been re-vitalised and is active in attending the corporate parenting board. There is wide attendance by other agency representatives, but this could be improved by the attendance of adult services and regular attendance by the virtual school.
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