

Inspection of Coventry local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 20 June to 1 July 2022

Lead inspector: Nick Bennison, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children's services in Coventry are good. Most children, throughout the service, are receiving the right level of support at the right time. The local authority has responded to areas for development from the last inspection and the focused assurance visit in 2021 to improve social work practice and service delivery. Leaders know the service well. They have developed a robust framework for quality assurance and performance management that ensures that they have an accurate overview of the service.

There is a strong political commitment to children's services across the whole council. Significant investment has been made to develop multi-agency early help hubs that cover all wards in Coventry, expand the family group conference and the lifelong links service, and to create specialist teams, such as those for carers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Strong partnership arrangements have led to strong joint working relationships, most notably with children experiencing domestic violence and children at risk of exploitation. Relational social work and restorative practice are embedded across services. As a result, there is consistent use of both direct work and life-story work by social workers. The voice of the child is important in Coventry and there is a strong participation offer that ensures that children's voices are heard and listened to at all levels of the local authority.

What needs to improve?

- The focus on children's views and carers' capacity to meet children's needs in private fostering arrangements.
- The response to children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless.
- The mental health and emotional well-being provision for care leavers.
- The quality of team managers' supervision provided to social workers.

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

1. Children and families benefit from an extensive and well-developed early help offer. The strong decision-making links between early help and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) ensure that most children receive the right support at the right time. When children do not meet the statutory threshold for social work action, they benefit from prompt and thorough early help assessments and plans.
2. The MASH is well managed and provides an effective and timely response to contacts and referrals. Thresholds are consistently applied. In most cases, consent is fully considered in the MASH and appropriately overridden when there are safeguarding concerns. Some referring agencies do not always seek consent to referrals and inappropriately leave this to the MASH. This means that some families are not aware that their information is being shared, and that MASH workers undertake work that should be completed by partners.
3. The emergency duty team provides an effective service. There is a seamless transition of work between day and out-of-hours services. This ensures that children and families receive a proportionate and responsive service.
4. Prompt action is taken to safeguard and protect children who are at risk of significant harm. Partners' engagement in strategy meetings, core groups and child protection conferences demonstrates the multi-agency commitment to child protection. Most strategy meetings are clear in the decision-making and in the level of intervention needed. Most child protection enquiries are thorough and thoughtful in their consideration of thresholds.
5. Children are routinely seen and seen alone. Social work visits are purposeful and reports are sensitively written. The use of a range of direct work ensures that social workers understand most children's circumstances. This understanding is used by social workers to help parents understand the concerns and what needs to change. The use of life-story work by social workers in help and protection services is a strength. It gives workers a deep understanding of children's views and the important relationships they have in the family. This knowledge enables social workers to be more effective in their intervention with both child and family.

6. Most children and families' assessments are timely and completed thoroughly. The social workers undertake direct work with the children and the adults in the household. This work creates a strong understanding of the strengths and of areas that need to be supported within the family and increases the probability that the social work intervention will create positive change for the child.
7. Most children who are in need of help and protection have well-coordinated and clear plans that identify what needs to change for the child. There is involvement of both families and partners in shaping and delivering plans. There is also regular involvement of children, through direct work, to help children understand and influence the plans for them. The increasing use of family group conferences contributes to a stronger family and community network within plans and reduces the need for statutory services.
8. Although social workers receive regular supervision with their team managers, this is variable in quality. Some supervisions are detailed and set out future actions and the timescales for the social workers to progress. Others, however, are less specific about actions and timescales, which leads to some drift.
9. The pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is successful in diverting children away from care proceedings, or when they are in unsafe situations, making early decisions to initiate proceedings. However, there remain some children who have been in PLO for too long. This leaves children and their families having greater local authority intervention than is needed, or children drifting in an environment where their needs are not fully met.
10. Social workers are alert to the impact of neglect through the increasing use of the graded care profile. This means that their assessment and response to concerns of neglect are both thorough and timely. There is a swift and appropriate response to domestic violence incidents by children's services. Most children and families receive comprehensive support, with work being undertaken with the children and the adults in the family to reduce the levels and impact of violence. There is skilled direct work undertaken with children and their parents by social workers that helps the whole family understand the impact that the violence is having on each of them. The strong partnership working between social workers and the probation service means that a whole-family approach to assessment and intervention is created. This means that both victim and perpetrator are engaged in work to create change at the same time. This has resulted in more sustained change for these families.
11. Disabled children in Coventry benefit from social workers who have an excellent knowledge of their specialism and who build effective relationships with children and their families. They engage with the family's strengths and, for most children, they create clear plans that are actively progressed.
12. Strong multi-agency working in the local authority protects children from exploitation. This is a real strength, with particularly strong links between children's services and the police leading to effective mapping and disruption work. Children and young people who are at risk of exploitation receive thorough and timely assessments which lead to detailed plans where a range of

resources are used to help keep children safer. Those children and young people at risk of radicalisation are helped effectively by a strong multi-agency approach that is underpinned by a high level of expertise.

13. Children living in families where there is no recourse to public funding receive prompt and effective practical support. Assessments completed by social workers are child-focused and ensure that additional needs or risks are understood and responded to.
14. Children aged 16 and 17 years who are homeless receive an inconsistent service. For some, there is a timely response, with a thorough assessment that considers the wider needs of the child as well as their housing needs. These assessments are completed within the children's timescales. However, for other children, responses are less robust, resulting in them living in uncertain, unstable and unsatisfactory circumstances while an assessment is completed. Children in Coventry are not routinely provided with clear guidance about all their rights and entitlements when they present as homeless.
15. Children living in private fostering arrangements are visited by their social worker. However, the assessments of these arrangements do not clearly focus on the child's views or on the capacity of the carers. This means that the local authority is not always clear as to whether these arrangements are in the child's best interests.
16. The local authority robustly manages children missing education (CME) through a single point of referral. The local authority recognised that they were not successfully engaging with a significant number of families. The development of a close relationship between children's services and the ethnic minority service (EMS) means that most parents are now contacted and successfully engaged with. The correspondence to families is timely and written in their first language. The CME team is accompanied on visits by interpreters from the EMS to ensure engagement with the family. A further strength of the local authority is that children missing education to date have never been off-rolled, and regular work is undertaken to support children into education for as long as they remain CME.
17. Children who are being electively home educated are initially screened. Children and their families are provided with relevant information to support their choice. They are regularly visited, and bespoke support plans are quickly put in place to ensure that children's educational needs are being met.

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

18. Most children enter care when they need to do so and live in appropriate and permanent placements that meet their needs. As a result, most children have improving experiences, progress and outcomes.
19. Most children benefit from early permanence planning. There has been a commitment by the local authority to support more children to live with wider

- family or friends if they cannot live with their parents. This has resulted in more children benefiting from being cared for by people they already know and trust.
20. Where appropriate, children are supported to live with kinship carers, connected carers or special guardians. Children who require permanence through adoption are being matched more quickly than previously. The number of children waiting to be matched for long-term fostering has reduced. However, for too many children in foster care it is still taking too long for formal ratification of their permanence plan.
 21. Children return home following comprehensive assessments and planning. Children's wishes and feelings are central to this work. When children are placed with their parents, the interim use of placement with parents arrangements is appropriate. For a small number of children, however, these arrangements last too long, leaving them with a level of uncertainty about their future.
 22. Children of all ages are well supported to make a meaningful contribution to their reviews. Well-chaired reviews provide effective challenge to prevent delays for most children in achieving permanence. Reviews have detailed minutes, with most having clear actions and timescales. Independent reviewing officers also regularly gain children's views between meetings and monitor their plans. All children in the local authority have access to independent advocacy and to independent visitors, and a good many make use of this offer.
 23. Most children live in stable placements that meet their needs, either in or close to Coventry. For some children who have complex needs or are disabled, there are fewer places available to meet their needs in Coventry. However, despite this, these children receive a comparable service to those who live in the local authority area.
 24. Family and friends time for children and young people is carefully and sensitively considered. As a result, children spend quality time with people who are important to them. The lifelong links service complements this by helping children and young people to maintain or re-establish relationships that are or have been significant for them.
 25. Most children in care benefit from committed social workers who know their children well and take great pride in their achievements. They establish positive relationships with children, which leads to creative direct work being undertaken so that they can better understand children's experiences and circumstances. This work is supported by good-quality life-story work that is routinely undertaken with children. A few children, however, experience too many changes of social worker. Supervision takes place regularly with social workers. There is considered overview and reflection about the child's plan. However, actions and timescales are not always clear enough to progress plans.
 26. The virtual school team is ambitious for children in care. Its members work alongside schools to develop creative educational support packages that meet children's educational needs. Children's personal education plans are regularly

reviewed with children and their parents. Plans are clear about actions to be taken and the timescale for achievement.

27. Children's health and well-being needs are competently addressed by the local authority. Most children receive regular and timely health, dental and optical checks. A range of interventions by child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) is helping to ensure that most children maintain positive mental health. Children also experience a wide range of leisure, social and cultural activities that support them in socially integrating into their local community.
28. Children in care are supported by the local authority to be safe. There is a robust multi-agency response for children and young people who are missing. Return home interviews are used effectively to contribute to safety planning. Each interview results in an overview by the missing coordinator of the number of episodes of going missing and if episodes are increasing in frequency then multi-agency meetings are held to review the safety plan. This has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of episodes of children in care going missing.
29. Children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC) in the local authority receive an inconsistent service. However, the development of the new UASC team by the local authority is leading to improved quality of assessments and plans. There is more to do to ensure that risk screening tools are completed promptly in order to ensure that the tightest safeguards for these young people are quickly in place. The local authority involves these young people in social and leisure events, which aids their integration into the local community.
30. Children's participation is a real strength in this local authority. Children in care and their council have a strong influence in shaping the local authority's provision of services. For example, they developed the local offer for care leavers and are involved in interviewing social work staff and in social work training. They raised the importance of life-story work and then supported the local authority in embedding its use across the service through workshops with social workers.
31. Increased use of foster carers, connected persons and special guardians means that more children remain living locally. Carers are well assessed and supported and they have access to a comprehensive training programme. This enables carers to understand and respond to children's individual needs and has led to stability of placement for most children.
32. Timely decisions are made to secure permanence via adoption. The local authority and the regional adoption agency, ACE, have worked hard to improve information presented to panel. As a result, children and adopters are well matched. Transitions for children are well planned and managed and adopters continue to receive support after the child is placed. Adopters are provided with therapeutic training, but this is not always targeted to help adopters understand and learn about the specific needs of some children.
33. The local offer provides a strong base for care leavers to understand their rights and entitlement to support. Care leavers in the local authority have well-

written and clear pathway plans. For most care leavers, but not all, pathway plans are updated in response to changing circumstances.

34. Most care leavers are well supported by their personal advisers (PAs) until they are 25. PAs have a good understanding of the young people they work with and the risks affecting them. Skilled direct work by PAs and partners promotes young people's safety. Care leavers' wishes are routinely sought by their PAs and these influence individual planning and wider service delivery.
35. Care leavers are well supported in transitioning to independence. A range of resources are used to support young people with the practical and emotional skills that they will need to move to adulthood. They are well supported with accommodation and can access a range of housing options. There is also a local commitment to support care leavers if they struggle to maintain their housing tenancies. For disabled children, transitional planning begins at age 16. This leads to comprehensive pathway plans that address need. There is also positive joint working with adult social care in the local authority to ensure a smooth transition.
36. Most care leavers are supported to engage in education, employment and training. Many young people make good progress and exceed their own expectations. For a small number of less motivated young people, their need for education, employment and training is not prioritised by their PAs and managers and this leads to drift.
37. Care leavers are provided with their health records and they are supported in accessing health services. For those with mental and emotional well-being needs, there is a delay in them receiving the right support at the right time. This is recognised by the local authority, and through the recommissioning of services from CAMHS it is addressing this service gap. The local authority encourages care leavers to participate in a range of leisure, social and cultural activities. This has supported young people with integration into their local community.
38. Most care leavers who are parents are well supported by their PAs, who offer them a planned and tailored intervention, to allow the young person to develop as a parent. The PAs work hard to ensure that services are coordinated for the young person and their child. PAs are strong and appropriate advocates for care leavers. This means that the local authority adopts a measured and supportive approach to these parents.
39. Care leavers who are in custody are regularly visited by their PAs and are fully involved in planning for when they leave custody. PAs create detailed early multi-agency plans to try and ensure a successful transition for these young people. They are given a wide range of accommodation choices by their PAs, who negotiate young people returning to family members or to establish independent accommodation. For most young people, the strong link that the PA develops with youth offending services ensures a strong understanding of the young person's needs and allows for a smooth transition from custody.

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

40. Senior leaders' drive and determination have led to improved services for children and families in Coventry. The members of the permanent and stable senior leadership team in Coventry know their service and their children well. There is an ambition to develop services and the team is responsive to internal and external challenge. This has created an environment in which relationship-based and restorative social work is embedded throughout children's services. This is an important change in the culture and focus of the organisation since the last inspection, which has led to most children experiencing improved outcomes.
41. There is strong political support for children's services from across the council. The lead member for children's services is both knowledgeable and passionate and is focused on improving the service for children. Corporate parenting is understood and taken seriously by the political members. All have had training from the Children in Care Council and the lead member in what their collective responsibilities are. There is also mature cross-party scrutiny of children's services in the local authority that focuses on outcomes for children, rather than political differences. In practical terms, this has meant continued investment in the development of the edge-of-care service, growth of family group conferencing, creation of early help hubs, specific teams to assess and support connected persons and special guardians, creation of a UASC team and investment in social workers in the locality teams. There has also been a commitment to a joint provision of services across the council, for example as seen in the 'House' project, which prepares young people practically and emotionally for independence.
42. Strategic partnerships with the local authority are strong. There is constructive challenge, training and auditing that leads to improved multi-agency working with colleagues in health, education and the police service and throughout the safeguarding partnership. This has particularly been seen in the joint approach to reducing risk for children at risk of exploitation, effective joint working with probation with families experiencing domestic violence and in the engagement and monitoring of CME.
43. The commitment of leaders in Coventry to ensuring that the voice of the child is central and influences the shape of service provision is a real strength. Young people are involved at all levels of the service, as individuals influencing their own plans to groups highlighting the need to strengthen or develop areas of service. Children and young people are involved in social work and councillor training. This has supported the cultural change that is now embedded in the local authority. There are examples, such as life-story work, where children and young people have identified the need and then supported the change in the service. More recently, young people are now involved in the commissioning work that is currently taking place with CAMHS around mental health and emotional well-being provision for care leavers. All of this ensures that

children's services in Coventry are responsive to children and young people's needs.

44. Senior leaders understand the quality of social work practice well. The use of performance board, practice meetings and data aids managers and practitioners to develop a shared understanding of areas of strength and weakness in children's services. This is supported by direct feedback from children and young people to the lead member and to the senior management group. A comprehensive quality assurance framework has been developed which involves a range of different audit tools across children's services. The focus of the framework on learning and the involvement of social workers has strengthened the approach. This has meant that the local authority has a much more accurate picture of children's services. There is also an engaged social work group that understands areas of strength and weakness and is positive about change.
45. The areas for improvement from the focused assurance visit in 2021 have been positively progressed. This is making an impact in diverting children from care proceedings and in ensuring earlier permanent placements. For some children, this has not been timely. The local authority is aware of this and is actively working with these children and families.
46. Some areas of practice require further senior management focus. Assessments in private fostering arrangements need to improve. Children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless should all be informed of their rights, and their assessments need to be both detailed and timely to ensure that they are being well supported.
47. Effective commissioning arrangements have led to an increase in family provision for children in the local authority. An increase in fostering households has meant that children are better able to maintain family and friendship groups. However, there is a need to develop mental health and emotional well-being services for care leavers and more local accommodation for disabled children or those with more complex needs.
48. Management supervision is variable in quality, frequency and impact in the local authority. Social workers report that supervision is regular, reflective and task-setting, but the written supervision records do not always reflect this.
49. Social workers are positive about working for Coventry and the cultural changes that have taken place. There is a turnover of staff that has led to some children experiencing too many changes of social workers. However, the local authority has countered this with a wide range of training and development options in the workforce offer and structured career pathways. There has been a focus on Coventry growing its own social workers and a supportive arrangement has been created for an assessed and supported year in employment through the social work academy. This work is beginning to have a positive impact on the stability of the workforce.

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