

Inspection of West Sussex local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 24 March 2023

Lead inspector: Maire Atherton, His 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Services for children and families in West Sussex County Council have substantially improved since the inspection in 2019, when they were judged to be inadequate across all areas. Corporate and political systemic weaknesses have been addressed and there is now a strong, determined and cohesive leadership team.

A relentless and incremental approach to improving practice has led to significant progress in some areas, such as the safeguarding and planning for unborn children, achieving permanence for children, and the effectiveness of quality assurance. There remain inconsistencies in children's experiences, particularly in the assessment and intervention teams and family safeguarding service. In part, this is due to turbulence in the system following the implementation of whole-scale service change in 2022, but it is also due to some high social worker caseloads and, until recently, turnover of staff in some teams. This is now stabilising and, following a successful recent recruitment drive, caseloads are beginning to fall.

Leaders have a clear and realistic understanding of the further improvements needed to ensure that all children receive a consistently good service, and they are committed to and focused on continuing to lead the necessary improvements.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness and quality of strategy discussions and child protection investigations.
- The consistent quality and effectiveness of assessments and plans for children in need and children in need of protection.
- The response to children aged 16 to 17 who present as homeless.
- The timeliness of initial health assessments and access to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for specialist assessments and therapeutic support when children are in care.
- The completion of return home interviews and their impact on planning for children when they go missing.
- Sufficiency of placement choice when children come into care.
- The quality of advice and support provided to care leavers aged 21 and over and unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people as they transition their leave to remain.

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

1. Early help support makes a positive difference to children's lives. Most families receive the right level of support at the earliest opportunity and their situations improve. Meaningful work with parents helps to provide them with insight and understanding about their children's needs and improve their parenting. Safety plans are routinely completed, with children and their families. Many children have their own age-appropriate understanding of what to do when there are risks and concerns. When concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to step up to statutory services.
2. The vast majority of children referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the emergency duty team receive a timely and appropriate response. Managers and social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of risk. Thresholds are applied well. Decisions are informed by partnership-working, with children at the centre. The need for parental consent is understood and well considered.
3. The domestic abuse hub within the MASH ensures a timely and comprehensive response to children and their families where domestic abuse is a concern.
4. When children are referred to the MASH for escalating mental health concerns and suicidality, their needs are triaged by the children's mental and emotional health team, which provides consultation, support and advice to the partnership to help reduce risk and inform sensitive work with children. The breadth of

work offered by the service is impressive and has supported a growing confidence in practitioners supporting children and identifying self-harm as a safeguarding issue.

5. When social workers in the MASH identify safeguarding concerns for children, a daily multi-agency meeting takes place to consider the social worker recommendation for a strategy discussion. This can lead to an unnecessary delay in decision-making for some children. The rationale for decisions to overturn the initial recommendation are not always clear or recorded. For some children, there are delays in strategy meetings taking place. When strategy meetings are held, they are mostly well attended by professionals, who share appropriate information to inform risk assessments and next steps. Plans recorded at the end of strategy meetings do not always specify short-term safety planning and next steps to inform a subsequent investigation.
6. The quality, timeliness and depth of child protection investigations are inconsistent. For some children where investigations are joint with the police, there is a small delay in them first being seen due to police availability. Some investigations are incident-focused and lack an assessment of wider needs.
7. Assessments and plans are of variable quality and impact. Some assessments provide a comprehensive picture of the child, which subsequently informs plans to address complex needs. However, other assessments do not capture the views of non-resident parents or the impact of interventions that have previously been tried. For a small number of children, child protection planning has not made enough difference in improving their day-to-day lives. For some children, child protection plans are ended prematurely and the subsequent support provided to them as children in need is insufficient. Consequently, some children experience repeated interventions and have a long history of involvement and neglect before they receive the help they need.
8. Most children are seen regularly by their social workers. Inspectors saw many examples of meaningful, creative direct work with children, conveying the child's voice, informing their plans and helping to make a positive difference to their lives. However, some children have experienced too many changes in social worker.
9. Practice within the Children with Disabilities service is also variable. For some children, highly imaginative work and persistence are used to address their needs and ensure the best outcomes. Weaker practice includes some assessments and plans that are too narrowly focused and do not consider the wider needs of other children or adults in the family.
10. The introduction of a pre-birth specialist role is having a positive impact in the early identification of concerns, assessments and interventions for unborn children. Tracking of unborn children, along with advice and support to social workers, ensures that work is progressed at pace. Appropriate support is identified for birth parents and parallel plans considered when required.

11. The oversight and response to children when they go missing have been strengthened since the last inspection. Comprehensive performance information is used effectively to provide managers with oversight of children who go missing and ensure that appropriate actions are taken when situations escalate. The completion of return home interviews to understand risks and inform planning is low. When return home interviews are completed, they are comprehensive and provide a strong sense of the child's experience, and the reason and circumstances leading to the missing episode.
12. Children identified as at risk of harm outside of the family benefit from support and intervention from a specialist team. Assessments provide a clear understanding of risk, including any wider risk to brothers and sisters. Clear, realistic and jargon-free safety plans address immediate safety and are used effectively to inform plans to reduce risk. Visits to children are purposeful, targeted direct work is undertaken and reachable moments or key opportunities are used well to further engage with and support children.
13. Management oversight and the effectiveness of practice for children in pre-proceedings have been significantly strengthened since the last inspection, but there remains some inconsistency. The duration of pre-proceedings is reducing and overall practice is more focused. This has enabled an increasing number of children to remain at home safely and be diverted from care proceedings. The quality of pre-proceedings assessments has improved. Letters before proceedings clearly outline the local authority concerns, the support offered to families and next steps. Some letters are not written in a style that helps parents to clearly understand what is required. A small number of children remain in pre-proceedings for extended periods of time. Long gaps between key meetings taking place and lags in assessments being completed contribute to delay in these cases.
14. Children living in private fostering arrangements benefit from comprehensive assessments and support from social workers.
15. An ever-increasing number of children are electively home-educated in West Sussex. The local authority has good oversight of elective home education. There has also been an increase in children missing education. Sometimes, this is because elective home education has not been successful. The local authority has recently further strengthened how it tracks and responds to children missing education.
16. The management and oversight of allegations against professionals are effective.
17. When children present as homeless, many benefit from a joint housing assessment and are appropriately supported to return to their family home. For some children, their vulnerability and circumstances are not well understood. Children are not routinely or clearly provided with information to inform them of

their rights and entitlements. This means that some children miss out on the benefits of having care-leaver status and support as they move into adulthood.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

18. When children come into care, it is for the right reasons. Over time, their circumstances improve and the vast majority make good progress. For a small number of children, the decision to bring them into care is not taken quickly enough.
19. The quality and timeliness of care proceedings for children are not yet consistently good. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary report provide a variable but improving picture of practice. The local authority recognises this as a practice area in need of ongoing improvement. Decisions to place children with their parents in care proceedings are well considered and supported. For complex situations, multi-agency working is well coordinated. This is less effective when older children opt to return to their parents' care in an unplanned way.
20. Concerted efforts are made by social workers to support birth parents to look after their children. Effective and intensive support to families by Solutions workers prevents some children from coming into care and enables children to return home from care when it is safe to do so. There is a strong ethos of securing permanence for children within their families and wider network wherever possible. Family members who are willing to provide ongoing care are considered promptly.
21. Many children have benefited from a stronger approach to permanence planning and the creation of a dedicated team to help take this forward. This area of work is becoming increasingly robust and embedded but there remains some variability in the frequency, quality and impact of permanence planning for all children. For example, the number of children living in permanent long-term foster homes and benefiting from the security and stability this brings has increased significantly, but some children are yet to have their permanence agreed and celebrated. Early permanence planning is a strength and well considered. An increasing number of children benefit from living in Fostering for Adoption arrangements. This is having a significant, positive impact on children who are placed at a younger age, enabling them to grow strong attachments to their forever families.
22. While most children in care benefit from stability and are living in homes that meet their long-term needs, a small number of children experience several placements when they first come into care before being matched with long-term carers. For a few of these older children, a lack of suitable emergency placements when they first come into care means that they are spending a short period of time living in hotels or rented accommodation while more appropriate arrangements are sought. In these emergency situations, locality

risk assessments are not always clear or well recorded. Leaders took steps to rectify this during the inspection.

23. A small and reducing number of children live in unapproved kinship arrangements. These arrangements are appropriately considered to be in the children's best interests. Where needed, steps are taken to mitigate vulnerabilities and provide additional support. Senior managers closely oversee and monitor children in these arrangements.
24. Most children benefit from having their care arrangements reviewed regularly. Children's plans are informed by an up-to-date assessment of their needs and focus on the support they require to help them make progress. For a minority of children, their plans are too broad and have long timescales for completion.
25. Many children benefit from having a consistent independent reviewing officer, who knows them well. Children are encouraged to (and do) attend and participate in their reviews. Key professionals are not always in attendance, but reports are provided. For some children, the absence of professionals is at their request. Records of reviews are captured in a letter written directly to the child. Most are child-centred and sensitively written, providing an informative and accessible account so that children can understand the decisions that are made for them. Records of reviews and plans for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are more complex and less accessible due to an extensive and repeated explanation of triple planning.
26. Unaccompanied children seeking asylum receive strong support from the dedicated social work team, which has the breadth of knowledge necessary to support children in the complex area of seeking leave to remain, alongside managing the impact of trauma, learning a new language and coming to terms with a new culture. Social workers have ready access to high-quality and sensitive interpreters who ably assist them in ensuring that children and young peoples' experiences are understood.
27. Children are seen regularly and in line with their changing needs by their social workers, who know them well. Some children continue to experience changes in social worker and, for a minority of children, this impacts on their engagement with the social worker and the progression of their plans. However, this is an improving picture.
28. Records of visits to children are warmly written and capture the child's voice as well as observations of the child's presentation by the social worker. Children and young people are actively engaged in their care planning. The child's voice is strong in their records and well considered at key decision-making points. Social workers use a wide range of purposeful, age-appropriate activities and creative direct work to engage with children.
29. Life-story work is evident, and most children have a clear understanding of why they are in care and what is happening to them. The quality of life-story books

is variable but includes some strong examples that draw on key interests of the child to personalise and engage them with their story.

30. Children's participation and influence in service delivery and practice have improved significantly since the last inspection. Children's voices are heard, and actions progressed via an active and engaged Children in Care Council.
31. While there have been improvements since the last inspection, there continue to be significant shortfalls in the timeliness of assessing children's initial health needs, despite senior management oversight in children's services and health. This means that, when children first come into care, their health needs are not fully understood. Most children benefit from comprehensive annual health assessments of their needs and their physical health needs are well met. An increasing number of children have access to a dentist, but this remains an ongoing area of focus.
32. For many children, there is evidence of strengths and difficulties questionnaires being completed but there is limited consideration of these in subsequent planning. Some children are accessing therapeutic support via an independent fostering agency or residential placement but, for others, there is a very long wait for specialist therapeutic support and assessments of neurodiversity. Leaders are aware of this and are exploring alternatives to address the need. Positively, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive timely support through the specialist CAMHS team to address the trauma they have experienced.
33. Children have opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities and hobbies that reflect their interests and abilities. Careful consideration is given to the arrangements for family time, which is appropriately informed by the child's best interests, and wishes.
34. The virtual school actively monitors children's attendance and academic progress, and mostly intervenes when needed. A minority of children are not accessing appropriate education provision, either because they are awaiting an education, health and care plan or because a suitable provision has not been identified. Provision for post-16 has been strengthened. The virtual school now continues to work with young people until they reach the end of Year 13, regardless of when they turn 18.
35. When children go missing, social workers go the extra mile to support them, and social workers have a good awareness of their children and an understanding of the risks they might be exposed to. However, the completion of timely return home interviews and the subsequent impact on planning are limited.
36. Mothers who have previously had children removed from their care benefit from some exceptional and tenacious interventions and support by practitioners to improve future outcomes for them and their children.

37. Foster carers benefit from a varied training offer to support them in meeting children's needs. However, sometimes there is a delay in being able to access the relevant mandatory courses. Not all connected carers are clear in their understanding about what this arrangement means for them and the children they care for.
38. The local authority has a strong and effective relationship with the regional adoption agency (Adoption South East). The quality of assessments presented to the adoption panel is of a high standard, ensuring the best possible matches for children. Adoption support plans for some younger children are too generic. Careful consideration is given to matching and the support required to enable children to move into their adoptive families. Plans for children are reviewed and amended in line with their changing presentation and needs.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

39. For many young people, the period of handover between children's social workers and personal advisers is too short. Despite an aim for personal advisers to be allocated to young people at 17.5 years of age, too many young people are allocated a personal adviser close to their 18th birthday. This means that young people have a limited opportunity to build a trusting relationship with their personal adviser. For some young people, this limits joint planning and does not support their move towards adulthood effectively.
40. Most young people have access to their key documents as they turn 18 but, for a small number of young people, this is not timely.
41. Pathway plans are completed collaboratively with the young person and many capture the young person's words and views. Some pathway plans are updated every six months but the updating of young people's plans when circumstances change is less evident. Elements of the unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers' pathway plans are generic and not written in accessible language. This is a particular concern as English is not their first language and the plans include detailed information to explain entitlements depending on the outcome of their pending asylum claim. While not yet live, the pathway plan template has very recently been refreshed and co-produced with young people. The revised template asks more specific questions and is outcome- and goal-focused in approach.
42. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are well supported through their asylum claim, including attendance at substantive interviews and appointments for biometrics. However, when they are given leave to remain, those who are living in block contract accommodation are given three months' notice to move. This is a vulnerable time for young people and, for a small number, their progress is hampered by this change in circumstance, environment and support provided, as they are moved away from the networks they have already developed.

43. Personal advisers can access a range of housing for young people. Most care leavers are living in accommodation suitable for their needs, where they feel safe. Young people are encouraged to stay put with their foster carers where appropriate and inspectors saw evidence of lifelong links between young people and carers as they moved further into adulthood. One young person described themselves as staying there long into the future, 'until I am an old man'. Links with housing are being further strengthened. A joint housing protocol is under development to promote a consistent approach from district councils to all young people in the county.
44. Young people's views are actively sought using a variety of different communication methods. Personal advisers are committed to ensuring that young people's needs are met. In times of need or crisis, personal advisers are highly responsive and available, ensuring that young people are appropriately supported. Workload pressures mean that some personal advisers do not always see young people when things are going well, and this restricts a more consistent and proactive level of support.
45. Many young people, including those in custody, are participating in education, employment or training. Young people are well supported to move from education to work and vice versa when requested. Some young people who are not in education, employment or training are actively supported to return by their personal adviser. For example, a personal adviser strongly advocated for and supported a young person when their university place was under threat. However, other young people do not have a clear support pathway to achieve their ambitions. While the virtual school has extended some support for care leavers post-Year 13, it is underdeveloped. A bridging course run jointly with the University of Chichester has supported some young people into apprenticeships and further education courses where no prior education attainment is needed.
46. Young people know how to contact their personal advisers and there is a well-publicised and used duty system.
47. Too few care leavers aged over 21 are actively supported by the local authority. The local authority website for care leavers is clear that support is available until the age of 25 years. However, only a small number of young people aged over 21 are actively open to and supported by the local authority. Leaders are aware of this and currently contacting the 300 young people closed to the service to ensure that they are aware of the offer available to them.
48. Young people are actively involved in the development of council initiatives. Care leavers have a strong, committed and effective participation group and they told inspectors of the direct influence they have had in shaping and developing the service. For example, they have co-produced the revised pathway plan template, been involved in the recruitment of staff, facilitated training across a number of key professionals, and are active participants in and co-chair the Corporate Parenting Panel and subgroups.

49. The local offer has recently been refreshed and developed, in co-production with the Care Leavers Advisory Board. There is a vibrant and comprehensive website which provides lots of useful information. However, some areas of the local offer are discretionary, and not open to all as they are dependent on a young person's current circumstances and where they live, for example regarding access to leisure services and Wi-Fi. This is compounded by different approaches of individual districts within the county. Care leavers told inspectors that the cost-of-living crisis is a big worry for them. Personal advisers know how to access various charitable funds to support young people and the local authority has just introduced an annual clothing allowance to support young people.
50. Most young people have access to their health histories and are registered with universal health services. The effectiveness of mental health support for care leavers as they transition from child to adult services is inconsistent. Some young people have good access to specialist mental health services when needed, but others are closed to CAMHS at age 18 and signposted to other services, which hinders their access to therapeutic support or diagnostic assessments.
51. Responses to young people at risk of exploitation or harm are mostly well considered and proportionate. Young people are supported by their personal advisers to work through issues that are causing them distress, drawing on other specialists within the team when needed, such as in relation to housing support.
52. Care leavers who are parents receive sensitive work to address their own needs as well as their children's needs.

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

53. A cohesive and effective senior leadership team, supported by corporate and political leaders and united by a shared vision, has made significant improvements to practice since the last inspection in 2019.
54. A root and branch review of the whole service began with a clear determination to shift the organisational culture to ensure that children are kept at the very centre of everything. A co-produced logo, 'Children First', encapsulates this. This change has been felt by children and care leavers and was a strong feature of inspector conversations with practitioners. Leaders recognised that the wholesale change could not be achieved all at once and have incrementally and successfully built the foundations for improvement.
55. The introduction of a service-wide practice model has been carefully considered and phase one successfully implemented. Phase two is now underway and includes increasing the number of specialist adult practitioners to support families. The implementation of and training in the model have provided a

service-wide platform for a common strengths-based language and a consistent way of working with families. Leaders are aware that expectations for recording have been challenging to implement, and they have a plan to review and streamline children's records.

56. Governance arrangements are strong, multi-layered and informed by the widespread use of accurate performance information. Operational boards interact meaningfully to deliver a consistent approach.
57. Significant financial investment has supported several key improvements and transformational change but there remains variability in the quality of service children and their families receive. Leaders know the service well and are committed to persistently progressing realistic improvement plans.
58. The local authority works well with improvement partners and has been open to external scrutiny and support to strengthen practice. Well-established, comprehensive and effective quality assurance processes give leaders a clear line of sight to practice. The collaborative involvement of social workers in the process provides an opportunity for reflection and a sound understanding of 'even better if' to further improve practice.
59. The local authority acts as a committed corporate parent. Political and corporate leaders ensure that outcomes for children in West Sussex improve. Since the last inspection, leaders have prioritised the active involvement of children in care and care leavers in the decision-making and development of the service. A notable achievement is the meaningful roles and participation of children and care leavers in the Children First Board and Corporate Parenting Panel. Children and young people co-chair corporate parenting meetings and are actively involved in setting the agenda. Children told inspectors that their opinions are actively sought and heard, and are making a difference.
60. Strategic partnership-working is improving, with senior leaders meeting and seeking solutions to issues together, but the impact remains variable. A strategic partnership response (led by children's services) to the prevention of, and support following, teenage suicides was creatively and thoughtfully developed, and implemented effectively. Conversely, too many initial health assessments are delayed, there are long waiting lists for some CAMHS provision, and a lack of police capacity is impacting on the timeliness of some strategy discussions and child protection investigations.
61. In common with a number of other local authorities, the sufficiency of suitable homes for children is a real challenge. Leaders have actively responded to the challenge. Since the last inspection, a comprehensive fostering service review substantially improved the support and training available to foster carers. Subsequently, West Sussex has seen a significant increase in fostering enquiries and newly approved households. This, alongside significant financial investment in high-quality residential provision, has enabled more children to live closer to

home. Despite this, there remains a shortage of foster carers to meet children's needs.

62. Leaders actively seek feedback from practitioners and adopt a solution-focused approach when there are areas of concern or barriers to practice. This has contributed to a palpable improvement in staff morale and enabled them to put children first, as they share this vision with each other and the leadership team.
63. Social workers find supervision to be reflective and helpful. Records of individual supervision are of variable quality and the subsequent impact is sometimes limited in progressing children's plans. Records of group supervision provide a greater depth of hypothesis, reflection and, therefore, value in understanding the child's experience and progressing their plans.
64. Senior leaders recognise that some children have experienced too many changes in social worker and that caseloads have been too high in some teams. The recruitment and retention of staff have been a strong and clear priority and a whole-service endeavour. This has improved retention and recruitment in the past six months.
65. Social workers, managers and other practitioners within the service benefit from a wide range of training and development opportunities. Career progression is actively encouraged and supported. A management assessment programme has provided managers with an understanding of their strengths and areas of practice that they would like to develop. Equally, there is a clear staff development programme, known to staff so that they know what they need to do to achieve career progression. Practitioners feel well supported and valued by managers and leaders in West Sussex.



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