

Leicester City Council

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection date: 19 June to 13 July 2017

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Children's services in Leicester require improvement to be good	
1. Children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance	Good

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

Executive summary

Services for children have improved significantly since the last inspection in 2015, which judged them overall to be inadequate. Senior leaders and managers took decisive action following this inspection and have remained clearly focused on securing the necessary improvements. While more work is needed before services are consistently good, sustained progress has been achieved.

One of the main foundations of this progress is the effective use of quality assurance and performance management information, which enables managers to understand what they need to do to keep children safe and how to better manage identified risks. In parallel with this is a radical transformation of culture, whereby staff feel safe working in an open and transparent environment, reporting that leaders manage change well. Senior leaders and officers recognise that there is no room for complacency. There is more to do to improve the quality and consistency of help that children receive, particularly their assessments of need, plans and frontline manager supervision.

The local authority has revitalised and strengthened relationships with partners. As a result, the support for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and young people leaving care is better. Those children at immediate risk of significant harm benefit from effective strategy discussions at the front door. These meet consistently high standards, are inclusive of all relevant partners and result in effective action to keep children safe. Having a secure and accessible front door continuously staffed by qualified social workers provides a consistent and swift response which avoids any delay in children's needs being identified.

Changes made through the local authority's improvement plan have now become part of everyday practice. The application of an effective joint-working protocol between housing and children's social care for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds is in significant contrast to previous poor practice. Young people at risk of homelessness now receive a consistent and appropriate response to meet their needs. Participation in the county-wide multi-agency child sexual exploitation hub since earlier this year is already showing a positive impact for children identified at risk of child sexual exploitation and those who go missing from home and care, and is informing children's plans to identify and reduce risk.

In parallel to progress, there remain areas of practice needing improvement. These include the work done for disabled children and those privately fostered. While assessments and plans for disabled children consider the needs of the whole family, responses to safeguarding for some children need to be quicker and are not yet good enough. Senior managers are considering the next stages for change and improvement to this service. Children living in private fostering arrangements do not benefit from having an individual assessment separately from their carers, so not all support plans fully consider their needs.

An effective leadership team has ensured that, while there has been a strong focus on improvements to former areas of inadequate practice, the quality of services provided to children looked after and care leavers has been sustained and adoption performance has improved. The majority of children looked after live in local, stable homes. The local authority is in touch with almost all of its care leavers, the vast majority of whom live in suitable accommodation. Care leavers report positively on their relationship with personal advisers. However, preparation into adulthood for some care leavers and disabled children is not happening early enough, so they cannot prepare for their future learning or employment opportunities until very late. Young people leaving care need better-quality health and medical information.

Children receive a good adoption service in Leicester and the quality of adoption services has been strengthened since the last inspection. Clear early permanence planning and success in achieving adoption for brothers and sisters together, disabled children and those from Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds mean that children achieve good outcomes.

A committed lead member actively promotes the local authority corporate parenting responsibilities, including the principle of 'as if this were my child', that underpin the strategic vision and five promises to children looked after and care leavers. The city council agreement to waive the first two weeks' rent when a care leaver moves into their first council tenancy will be a substantial support for young people. While local authority senior leaders and officers demonstrate an ownership of their corporate parenting responsibilities, they recognise that more still needs to be done. The city council has been too slow to provide ring-fenced opportunities for its care leavers in work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships, and the capacity of the virtual school does not enable staff to drive improvement for all children looked after.

Inspectors met with four very impressive and different groups of children and young people who were all willing to share their experiences about what it is like to receive support in Leicester. Inclusion of these children's views and listening to children receiving services are actively promoted by senior leaders and managers. Inspectors observed members of the Children in Care Council receiving training for participation in social work staff recruitment panels. The opportunity for children in need of help and protection to access advocacy support so that they can influence decisions made in multi-agency meetings is less strong and is an area for improvement. The vast majority of children looked after have strong relationships with their independent reviewing officers, who, because they have lower caseloads, can build stronger relationships with children, support them in their reviews and promote permanence.

Workforce stability and the recruitment of permanent social workers continue to be challenges for leaders and managers in Leicester. There is some progress in reducing changes in social worker for some children, but such changes are still too common, which reduces children's opportunity to build trust. Although mitigated by effective auditing, frontline management oversight is not always effective, so the work to effect change for some children is too slow. The local authority is now close to having a fully permanent management workforce.

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The local authority

Information about this local authority area¹

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates five children's homes. Four were judged to be good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspections.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in 20 March 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - Overall effectiveness: inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: inadequate
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: requires improvement
 - Adoption performance: good
 - Experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement
 - Leadership, management and governance: inadequate

Local leadership

- The director of children's services has been in post since October 2014.
- The city mayor has been in post since 5 May 2011 and was re-elected on 7 May 2015.
- The chief operating officer has been in post since April 2012
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board has been in post since June 2016.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 82,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Leicester City. This is 24% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 29% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 17% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 18% (the national average is 13%).

² The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 58% of all children living in the area, compared to 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian/Asian British and Indian.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 52% (the national average is 20%)
 - in secondary schools is 50% (the national average is 16%).

Child protection in this area

- At 1 July 2017, 2,403 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 2,638 at 31 March 2016.
- At 1 July 2017, 485 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 58 per 10,000 children). This is a reduction from 518 (63 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2016.
- At 1 July 2017, five children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is a reduction from nine at 31 March 2016.
- In the two years before inspection, seven serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and three serious case reviews have been completed.
- There were three serious case reviews ongoing at the time of the inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 1 July 2017, 662 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 80 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 645 (79 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2016. Of this number:
 - 341 (or 52%) live outside the local authority area
 - 69 live in residential children's homes, of whom 61% live out of the authority area
 - three live in residential special schools,² all of whom live out of the authority area
 - 474 live with foster families, of whom 50% live out of the authority area
 - 45 live with parents, of whom 27% live out of the authority area
 - 13 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

³ These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 32 adoptions
 - 30 children became subject to special guardianship orders
 - 213 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 3% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 38 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - 12 children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses in multiple occupation.

Recommendations

1. Improve the quality of social work assessments, so that they are consistently informed by the child and his or her family history, reflect the diverse identities of individual children and are updated regularly to take account of children's changing needs and circumstances.
2. Improve the timeliness and quality of safeguarding interventions for disabled children.
3. Ensure that practice for children who are subject to private fostering arrangements meets statutory requirements and that all privately fostered children have an individual assessment.
4. Ensure that children are enabled to participate in meetings that inform their plans and that these plans are succinct, containing clear details, actions and timescales.
5. Ensure that the virtual school has the capacity to drive improvement for all children looked after.
6. Improve the quality of medical and health information that care leavers receive prior to leaving care.
7. Reduce the number of 18- to 21-year-old care leavers who are not in education, employment or training.
8. Ensure that the transition arrangements from children's social care to adult services for young disabled children who have additional needs are both timely and effective.
9. Improve the quality of frontline management oversight and direction across all teams to ensure that management oversight of practice supports effective case progression and decision-making.
10. Ensure that elected members demonstrate a commitment to, and ambition for, children looked after, through regular attendance and participation in the corporate parenting forum.
11. Develop a commissioning and sufficiency strategy to ensure that services are commissioned against identified need within an agreed framework across the city.

Summary for children and young people

- Services for children who need help in Leicester are getting better. Council leaders and officers have worked very hard so that when most children and their families need help, they have this at the time that they need it.
- Some children have too many changes in social worker, and this makes it hard for them to have good relationships. This is getting better, and more social workers want to work and help children in Leicester.
- Assessments for some children need to include much more information about them and their family. This will help to make sure that their plans are clear, so that children and families know what needs to change to make things better.
- Social workers and managers make the right decisions about which children need protection and when children are not able to live at home with their parents. They find them a good home and make sure that children see people who are important to them. Children live with the people looking after them for a long time, and have the help that they need to make sure that they are healthy and go to school regularly.
- Children whose plan is for them to be adopted live with families very quickly and receive plenty of help. They are able to live with their brothers and sisters. Adopters are very happy with the support that they have to help children and young people to live in homes that best meet their needs.
- Young people leaving care receive a service that needs to improve. They need more information about their health and medical needs. Young people do not always know soon enough what help they can access when they become an adult, and too many care leavers are not in education, employment or training.
- Young people leaving care are happy with the support that they receive to find a good and safe place to live. Staff mostly keep in contact with them and young people know where to go for help when they need it.
- Disabled children and their families need to have help more quickly when they need support. Council leaders and managers will be putting together a plan to make this service better.
- Children's views are very important to workers and managers, who make sure that they are included in the plans or changes that they make to services. Children's views are valued and well respected, and inspectors saw some good examples of this when they met with four different groups of children.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection

Requires improvement

Summary

Children’s services are managing risks effectively for children in Leicester. Priority areas for improvement since the previous inspection have been addressed, particularly in relation to meeting the needs of homeless children at 16 and 17, ensuring that children have an allocated social worker, and that assessments and plans are completed for children in time.

Children and families who are identified as needing help and protection receive an effective and prompt response from the 24-hour duty and advice service. Families benefit from a wide range of early-help services, with the majority of families receiving help when they first need it.

Children who need an assessment have one, though the quality of these is not always good. Some assessments need better information gathering from other professionals and more in-depth analysis of wider risks. The impact of this for some children is that their written plans are not always clear about what needs to change and within what timescale, resulting in delay in improving outcomes.

While assessments and plans for disabled children appropriately take into account the whole family’s needs, including brothers and sisters, the timeliness in service response, the quality of assessments and the implementation of safeguarding procedures to better manage risks are not yet consistently good enough.

Opportunities for children to participate in their reviews and planning need improvement, as advocacy services of support have limited capacity thus not all children can benefit from this.

Multi-agency meetings are generally well attended by partners, and information on children’s needs and risks is shared fully. This effective communication and partnership working makes a tangible difference to children in terms of risk reduction and ensuring that all of their needs are met.

Not all privately fostered children have an individual assessment of their needs, and visiting frequency does not always meet requirements. This means that some privately fostered children are not seen and assessed quickly enough to identify support plans.

Children who are identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation receive effective, specialist, multi-agency responses. The service ensures that risks to children are reduced. Children who are missing from home benefit from return home interviews, which directly inform their safety plans.

Inspection findings

12. Children in need of protection and help in Leicester receive a timely and effective response when they need it. Significant work on improving the local authority 'front door' and partners' understanding of thresholds means that children who are at risk of harm are swiftly identified and protected. Having early-help workers as part of an assured 'front door' process ensures that contacts who do not meet the social care threshold can be quickly diverted to early-help services. The move to one contact telephone number in January 2017 means that families and professionals can access both social care and early help easily.
13. The duty and advice service operates a 24-hour rota, which means that there is a consistent, timely response by qualified social workers out of hours.
14. The early-help clusters across Leicester offer a variety of interventions in partnership with health, education and external voluntary services, and most families receive help when they need it. There is good use of advice points to ensure a quick response to families with an urgent need and, in spite of rising demand, there is currently no waiting for the early-help service. The vast majority of children identified as needing increased intervention are stepped up to social care from early-help services appropriately. This escalation is timely and ensures that children receive more specialist support. There is good use of the multi-agency support panel to inform decision-making.
15. A review of early help is underway. The local authority had already recognised the need for partner agencies to increase the number of early-help assessments and lead professional roles that they undertake. This is in the context of rising demand and a concern that children and families will continue to need to receive services that meet their needs in good time.
16. The majority of contacts received by the duty and advice service are of good quality, and thresholds are applied appropriately to identify the level of help needed by children. Those identified as needing early help do not always have a clear rationale recorded for this decision.
17. Children at risk of immediate harm are quickly identified, and the large majority of strategy discussions take place on the same day or within 24 hours. There is excellent attendance and engagement by other agencies, resulting in purposeful information sharing, strong decision-making and actions to protect children. Child protection investigations are completed swiftly and appropriate decisions are reached. Children are protected effectively because of actions taken.

18. The local authority has made significant improvements in responding to the needs of homeless children aged 16 and 17 since its last inspection. These children receive a timely and appropriate intervention which results in the provision of safe accommodation and services which meet their needs. The joint protocol in place between housing and children's services explicitly states that bed and breakfast accommodation is unsuitable, thus it is not used. The option for children to become looked after is appropriately considered in all cases, and decision-making is informed by good-quality joint assessments. Young people are aware of their options and helped to make informed decisions.
19. The quality of children's assessments, including those in early help, is not yet consistently good enough. Some lack consideration of children's history to inform the assessment, resulting in gaps in knowledge of children's family backgrounds. Identity needs are not always recognised or explored, while others lack depth and professional curiosity and so do not consider wider issues of potential risk. Assessments are not always updated in light of children's emerging needs. There is considerable improvement in assessment timescales for children, and in some stronger assessments research is used effectively in the analysis of risk and the child's lived experience is at the centre of the assessment. In these, there is good consideration of additional needs and well-informed actions to reduce risk, but these are not consistently the case. (Recommendation)
20. Child protection and child in need written plans need further improvement. Some plans are too long and repetitive, omit timescales for action and are not updated when needs change. This means that it is difficult for families to understand what needs to change. Reviews of children's plans do not clearly focus on progress or what has changed in children's circumstances. The lack of dynamic assessments means that some plans lack inclusion of wider or less immediate risks. Drift is therefore evident, leading to delays in some children's needs being met and risks reduced. (Recommendation)
21. Children benefit from regular core groups, multi-agency meetings and reviews. The majority are timely and child-centred, and parents have an opportunity to engage and contribute fully in meetings. Multi-agency engagement is good, but reviews are not consistently preventing drift or securing improved outcomes for all children. Chairs of child protection conferences have high caseloads, which has a negative impact on their ability to add value, including their ability to track children's progress and engage children and young people effectively. When plans are drifting, there is often a lack of escalation or challenge by the child protection chair due to this lack of capacity. (Recommendation)

22. When child protection plans end, decisions to step down to a child in need plan are appropriate and timely in the majority of cases. Some strong practice was seen where the child in need plan helped families to sustain positive change, with the team around the child continuing to provide effective support. For a minority of children who were stepped down from a child protection plan, other agencies' commitment to attending reviews reduced. For these children, it was only the tenacity of their social worker that prevented concerns from escalating again.
23. The multi-systemic teams offer a responsive, effective service for children and families. Their intervention sustains positive change and improves outcomes for children who are at risk of becoming looked after or have previously been subject to child protection or children in need plans. These teams are a real asset to Leicester children and families.
24. The vast majority of social workers spoken to know their children and families well, and see children regularly and alone. Social workers' verbal feedback often shows more insight into what children need and the risks posed to them than the children's records. In some cases, social workers consider identity, culture and heritage well, and visit children in a variety of settings to gain a holistic view of their life. This includes visiting disabled children in their short-break settings and consideration of their additional vulnerabilities. Younger children are not always given the opportunity to contribute to their plans, but older children, particularly those at risk of child sexual exploitation or missing from home, are engaged well in their own safety planning.
25. Advocacy services for children in need of help and protection are underdeveloped. There is a very limited advocacy resource for this group of children, which means that only a few are able to benefit from it. This reduces the ability of children to directly influence decisions affecting their lives.
(Recommendation)
26. The quality of social work practice is too variable in the disabled children's service. Strategy discussions are not timely, for some disabled children, and are not well attended by partners. This means that information about the risks to the child cannot be fully considered or used to inform decisions. While assessments consider the needs of brothers and sisters and the whole family, there is inconsistency in quality and, in some, limited information from other professionals about parenting capacity. This means that not all information on support needs or risks is shared to create effective plans.
27. When children experience domestic abuse in their homes, the multi-agency risk assessment conference offers valuable multi-agency information sharing and risk planning. Children are central to risk planning, and actions to mitigate risk are specific. These actions translate directly onto children's files in most cases and are actively followed up by social workers in subsequent work. Links with other risk areas, such as parental mental health or substance misuse, are not always evident and can undermine the effectiveness of plans.

28. The local authority has made great progress in securing effective multi-agency engagement to reduce risk for children at risk of sexual exploitation and going missing from home and care. Leicester City joined the county-wide multi-agency child sexual exploitation hub in January 2017 and, as a result, there is swift information sharing and decision-making. This leads to recognition of links between other known adults and children, and wider risk identification and actions to reduce risk. Children at risk of sexual exploitation receive skilled direct work and support, with effective co-working between the child sexual exploitation hub and children's social workers, and this directly reduces risk. Regularly reviewed child sexual exploitation risk assessments inform safety planning, with coordinated multi-agency responses reducing risk.
29. The majority of children who go missing from home are routinely offered return home interviews after they have returned from being missing. This is not consistently timely for those children who frequently go missing from home or care, and performance data does not always accurately record that a return home interview has taken place. When children engage with workers who complete the return home interviews, the quality of discussion is of a good standard and the information is appropriately passed to children's social workers to inform safety planning.
30. Leicester is meeting its 'Prevent' duty in relation to safeguarding children. 'Prevent' workers are engaged with children and young people and contribute effectively to key decision-making. However, the extent of joint working or decision-making was not clear on all children's records. The identification and response to children at potential risk of female genital mutilation require improvement. In the past year, there have been some missed opportunities for robust assessment and support services where female genital mutilation is a risk.
31. Vigorous identification, monitoring and tracking are in place for children missing education. Clear and comprehensive policies and procedures ensure that reporting by the local authority and schools is timely and relevant. Concerns regarding individual children are escalated appropriately, and there are good communication and information services in place across relevant services and agencies.
32. At the time of the inspection, increasingly high numbers of children were being home educated. A number of families that have chosen not to engage with the local authority have appropriate risk assessments in place to monitor children's welfare. For the majority of children who are home educated, home educators are in touch with the local authority and receive a range of useful information, advice and support.

33. Children subject to private fostering arrangements do not receive their own individual assessment of need, but share assessments with their private fostering carers. Combining children's needs with those of potential private foster carers does not ensure that there is sufficient analysis of their individual needs or experience, resulting in potentially unassessed risk.
(Recommendation)
34. Systems to support the arrangements for managing allegations against professionals and carers in Leicester have not been sufficient. Numerous staff have taken on the role and functions of the designated officer over recent months, and information on adults posing risks to children is not held in one place, so it is not easily accessible. Strategy meetings do not consistently involve education, and actions specific to the designated officer are often unclear. Senior management are aware of these shortfalls and have taken appropriate action. This includes the creation of a comprehensive recording system and the successful appointment of a permanent designated officer. The impact of these actions is yet to be seen.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement

Summary

Services for children looked after in Leicester have been sustained following the last inspection, though they require improvement to be good. Children only become looked after when they need to, and generally this happens at the right time. Children on the edge of coming into local authority care receive good, intensive support to enable them to remain with their families.

The majority of children looked after live in local, stable homes and have good relationships with social workers and independent reviewing officers, who know them well. There are still too many changes in social worker for some children, and this prevents them from building a meaningful relationship.

Public Law Outline processes are increasingly effective, and the average timescale for the conclusion of care proceedings continues to improve, overall.

The quality of most assessments and written care plans is not consistently good. Some children’s assessments lack detailed analysis of how previous concerns inform current and future needs. This results in some children’s plans lacking specific actions and timescales, and not all are updated regularly to reflect children’s changing circumstances and needs, leading to delay in actions to improve their circumstances. Children’s diverse needs are well understood and met when they live with carers who do not have the same cultural identity.

Initial health assessments and annual health reviews are not consistently timely, and there are delays for some children in receiving child and adolescent mental health services. The current capacity of the virtual school team is insufficient to meet the needs of all children who are looked after by the local authority.

Children missing from care are tracked and monitored effectively. Anti-bullying work with schools and youth services is a strength in Leicester.

Adoption services are strong. Permanence is achieved quickly, matching is very effective and social workers prepare children well for their transition. Adopters are positive about the level of support that they receive through the adoption journey, particularly the quality of post-adoption support.

The local authority is in touch with almost all of its care leavers, and the vast majority live in suitable accommodation. However, care leavers are not receiving enough early help in planning for their transition into adulthood.

Inspection findings

35. Decisions for children entering care are appropriate in almost all cases, and are taken at a senior level. When there are clear and immediate risks to children, the local authority responds swiftly and effectively to secure their safety. However, when risks to children are identified as chronic neglect, the decisions for a few children to become looked after are sometimes too slow. The local authority has recognised this, and has appointed a case progression manager within the children in need service to track and monitor all cases to support appropriate and timely decision-making.
36. Children at risk of becoming looked after by the local authority receive effective edge-of-care intervention provided by the multi-systemic teams, resulting in a number of children remaining safely with their families. The Public Law Outline (PLO) is used effectively with families to address areas of concern. Pre-proceedings letters appropriately and clearly set out what changes families need to make to safeguard their children. The case progression manager's tracking of cases supports improved timeliness of care planning for children.
37. The timeliness of viability assessments of potential carers for children is improving, but their quality varies. Better assessments provide an analysis of risks and of the capacity of carers to meet current and future needs and to protect children. However, many viability assessments proceed to stage two without a robust analysis of the carer's likely capacity to keep children safe and meet their needs. Subsequent full assessments then appropriately conclude that children should not be placed with these family members on a permanent basis, thereby creating delays in decision-making. (Recommendation)
38. The local authority implemented a revised social work evidence template from 1 January 2017. Social workers are supported effectively to improve the quality of court assessments, statements and reports. Managers quality assure and scrutinise the documents before passing them to legal services for review and filing with the court. The Children and Family Court Advice and Support Service (Cafcass) has noted this improving quality of work.
39. Children's need for legal permanence is largely supported in a timely manner. For the majority of children, care plans are accepted by the courts without the need for expert or independent assessments. The timeliness of care proceedings is improving. Working relationships with the courts and Cafcass continue to improve. Senior managers are fully involved in the work of the local family justice board, and Cafcass is a member of the local authority improvement board. This is enabling effective working together to improve performance and outcomes for children in the PLO process.

40. For the majority of children who return to the care of their families, this is a planned move supported by appropriate assessment and care planning. Effective multi-agency support packages and regular monitoring ensure that children continue to be safeguarded and their needs met. Return home plans are appropriately agreed at children looked after reviews, ensuring independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight and senior management sign off. In a few cases seen where older children choose to return home, there is a lack of active planning by social workers to support a safe return home. Potential risks are not always fully explored and understood, and therefore the support provided is not always comprehensive. Despite this, no children were identified as at risk because of these shortfalls.
41. The quality of looked after children's assessments and care plans is not good enough. Assessments are generally timely, but vary in quality. Some children have good assessments that consider their family background, provide detailed analysis of risk and are updated when their circumstances change. Assessments are used routinely to appropriately inform planning and intervention based upon a holistic understanding of children's lived experience. Some children have assessments with an incomplete exploration of their history and limited consideration of children's changing needs. (Recommendation).
42. Where assessments are weak and do not fully identify children's needs, this leads to variable quality in written care plans. Many lack detail, clarity and timescales for expected action and change. Plans are not updated regularly or always informed by an updated assessment, and this is not challenged sufficiently by managers or during supervision of social workers. (Recommendation)
43. Children looked after are seen regularly and alone by their social workers both where they live and in school. Direct work is undertaken to ensure that their views are ascertained and taken into account, and for some children this has informed their plans. The majority of children have meaningful relationships with social workers and IROs who know them well. However, a number of children have experienced several changes in social worker in a short period. Despite the recently improved stability of workers, some children have not had enough opportunity to develop trusting relationships with their social workers.
44. Statutory reviews are generally timely, with 96% within timescales. The vast majority of children (93%) participate and engage in their reviews via advocacy support or completion of a 'your views, your review' consultation booklet. Increased capacity within the IRO service and reduced caseloads enable children to give their views to IROs between reviews, and the IROs' footprint is increasingly evident within children's records, demonstrating a timelier overview of progress between reviews and an increase in the challenge and escalation of concerns.

45. When children looked after are at risk of sexual exploitation or go missing from care or education, effective multi-agency working ensures that support and intervention are provided to children to mitigate risk. Children are routinely offered return home interviews after they have returned from being missing and, when they engage, the quality of information is good and helps to inform children's plans. Close partnership working between the youth offending service and other agencies results in well-considered holistic support for children looked after who offend.
46. Completion of initial health assessments within 28 days of children's reception into care have fluctuated over the last year. Consequently, children are not having their health needs assessed or met in a timely manner, and this includes children placed out of the local authority area. The local authority recognises that this is an area that requires further improvement and has introduced a tracker system to ensure that all requests for initial health assessments are sent within 48 hours of a child becoming looked after. This positive action alongside health partners, which has increased capacity within the children looked after nurse's team, has improved recent performance.
47. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires are not completed regularly. This means that some children's emotional well-being and health needs are not well understood and do not inform health assessments. The child and adolescent mental health service provides timely initial assessments. However, carers and social workers report frustration at the time that it takes to access support. The longest waiting time was 29 weeks. The impact of the delay in the provision of service for some children is mitigated by access to a range of therapeutic interventions provided by the children and family support team or through the spot purchasing of individual therapeutic services and psychological assessments.
48. The educational attainment of looked after children in Leicester City requires improvement. Key stage 2 attainment has not improved overall, and performance is weaker in reading and writing than last year. In mathematics children reached their expected attainment level, and attainment in the combined reading, writing and mathematics test was better overall. Key stage 4 attainment for five or more A*-C grades showed a narrower gap, at 38% in Leicester, than that of statistical neighbours and nationally (42%). The progress made by children looked after between key stage 2 and key stage 4, measured using Progress 8, was less than the expected level. However, children looked after in Leicester made better progress than children looked after nationally.

49. The majority of children looked after (74%) attend good or better schools. Attendance is monitored effectively and local data shows steady improvement, at 91%. There were no permanent exclusions in 2015/16. A new electronic personal education plan (ePEP), implemented in January 2017, is still being embedded and the quality of PEPs remains variable. The completion rate has improved significantly and at the end May 2017 stood at 90%. In all PEPs seen, the use of pupil premium grant is closely linked to supporting the child's achievement and learning goals.
50. Children looked after who attend alternative provision, either in the city or out of area, are subject to regular scrutiny and monitoring. All placements have received quality assurance and health and safety and safeguarding visits to ensure that children are not disadvantaged or put at risk. For those children who are not in full-time education, the work to place them is swiftly and appropriately prioritised.
51. The current capacity of the virtual school team is insufficient to meet the needs of all children who are looked after by the local authority. The team is comparatively small for the size of cohort and not all its members are on full-time contracts. Consequently, development is limited, such as transition work with children during the school holidays and focused help and support for foster carers. (Recommendation)
52. A wide range of innovative approaches are used to tackle bullying by raising awareness. These include developing ideas, priorities and activities to address all types of bullying, particularly hate crime. For example, a city-wide ballot reached 12,000 children involved in the survey 'Make your mark 2016'. Young people have been proactive in developing resources with workers in a range of settings, including the Children in Care Council. The local authority guidance for foster carers on bullying is comprehensive and is included in the foster carers' handbook. Good guidance and advice to all schools about cyber bullying and internet safety are used effectively to help children and young people to stay safe.
53. The heritage panel is used effectively to improve intervention to support children's heritage and cultural needs. However, while ethnicity is usually well considered, diversity is viewed through too narrow a lens within assessments and care planning. Social workers do not sufficiently explore children's identity needs in the broader context of their lived experiences, such as disability, separation and loss.

54. Permanence planning, including parallel planning for some children, is improving, although it is not yet happening sufficiently quickly for all children. While the local authority has recognised the need for development and created the permanence progression panel and the permanence case manager post, it is too early to evaluate their impact. The frequency of permanence planning meetings is not always clear and there is insufficient tracking of the outcomes of meetings to ensure that actions are completed. This has led, for some children, to delays in securing long-term non-adoption permanence plans.
55. The vast majority of children looked after live in stable placements which meet their needs effectively. Brothers and sisters are placed together, unless their plans identify that this would not be in their best interests. Contact between children and their family and friends is promoted well and reviewed appropriately to ensure that it meets the needs of children.
56. The timeliness of foster carers' reviews has improved significantly, with 94% completed in May 2017. This is the best performance in six years, and means that foster carers are appropriately supported to help to care for children. Foster carers have access to a thorough training offer, and a high number of carers are completing the training support and development standards. Foster carers are positive about the support that they receive from their social workers. Support for the birth children of carers is delivered effectively through an energetic 'sons and daughters' group.
57. Not all foster carers have written delegated authority. They report that they do not consistently receive all the necessary information about children before the placement begins. This has an impact on their ability to make informed decisions and to have pertinent individual information about children to help them to care for them. (Recommendation)
58. The Children in Care Council is well established and highly motivated. The children's rights and participation team supports it and works effectively with the corporate parenting forum, particularly in contributing to surveys of children looked after. Members attend the corporate parenting forum to share findings and views and provide feedback on important issues. The Children in Care Council has been actively involved in organising celebration events and is taking forward a suggestion to hold an event for care leavers which will provide information about support and entitlement.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good

59. Securing permanence through adoption is a high priority in Leicester, with 32 children adopted from April 2016 to March 2017. Adoption is considered for all children, and at an early stage.
60. Managers understand the adoption data well and know where they need to target their improvements, such as improving the consistency of child permanence reports. A detailed improvement plan is in place, identifying the necessary actions to improve the service further.
61. Children receive an effective service from a well-established and experienced team of social workers led by committed and knowledgeable managers. Social workers and managers know their children well and robustly track all of those awaiting adoption. All children waiting have potential links with adopters. Information about children and prospective adopters is shared promptly across the East Midlands adoption consortium. This, together with the good use of national links, helps to ensure that adoption permanence is achieved quickly for children in Leicester.
62. Family finding is thorough, detailed and sensitive to the needs of the child. Family finders are tenacious and, as a result, the local authority has been successful in achieving adoption over the past year for brothers and sisters together, disabled children and children from Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds. The ethnicity of children is considered sensitively when looking for families, but is not a barrier to prospective adopters who have the skills to meet the needs of children. The local authority demonstrates determination to find the right family for children, even when this may take some time. Inspectors were impressed by the 'never give up' attitude to finding the right family for children.
63. Parallel planning for children routinely takes place to minimise delay. Clear progress is being made in developing foster-to-adopt arrangements, with an increasing number of carers approved and an increasing number of children benefiting from such arrangements. Appropriate use of the care planning regulations has enabled children to be placed with their brothers and sisters while further statutory processes are undertaken, thereby minimising delay and the need for placement moves.

64. Decisions that children should be placed for adoption are clear and based on evidence-based assessments which demonstrate the impact of parental behaviour on children. However, there is a lack of clear recording by the agency decision-maker on the rationale for these decisions. There are very few changes to adoption care plans, meaning that the care planning is robust and reflects the considerable efforts made to achieve adoption for children. The reversal of decisions is mostly due to appropriate consideration of the suitability of viable family members who had become known late in the planning process and were able to offer appropriate care for children within the wider family.
65. Adopter assessments are uniformly strong. Probing explorations of applicants' personal histories, relationships and motivations for seeking to adopt children are evident. Balanced and proportionate social work reports evaluate applicants' strengths and potential vulnerabilities. Regulatory checks and references are undertaken and documented. Assessments are mostly completed within six months, with any delays being triggered by applicants rather than by shortcomings in the adoption service.
66. Child permanence reports are of variable quality. In some, there is a lack of detail relating to individual children and their brothers and sisters, with insufficient information relating to assessments of their needs being recorded. Management audits have identified this variability and plans are in place to improve consistency.
67. Adopters spoken to by inspectors spoke positively of their experience of the assessment process and the training provided. While challenging, the process was thorough, and gave them confidence and a good understanding of the needs of adopted children. Adopters felt that they were given a realistic understanding of the kind of trauma that children looked after may have experienced and the potential impact of this on children throughout their childhood. Adopters from a wide range of backgrounds are approved, reflecting the diverse ethnic communities in Leicester.
68. Matching reports are of a good standard, demonstrating the care taken in matching children. The needs of children are clearly identified, with thorough analysis of how adopters can meet these needs. Areas of potential vulnerability are less well defined, though support needs are identified and addressed through the provision of a clear support plan to appropriately meet children's needs.
69. There is an experienced adoption panel chair with a professional background in adoption work. Panel members closely examine reports prior to meetings, devising incisive and pertinent questions for social workers and potential adopters concerning matches and approvals. Panel minutes evidence scrutiny and challenge. The panel comprises an experienced blend of professional and lay members. All panel members are appraised annually by the adoption panel chair and attend training and development events.

70. Children benefit from meaningful contact with those important to them. Assessments focus on what is right for them following their adoption. A dedicated contact worker facilitates and supports both direct and letterbox contact. Consequently, children benefit from maintaining relationships, when appropriate, and receiving letters that will add value to their lives in terms of their identity. When it has been important for children to maintain some direct contact with key people, careful matching has secured adopters who understand and support this contact.
71. Introductions are well planned, and children are extremely well supported to prepare them to live with their future families. Life-story work is of a high quality. It is clear, colourful and jargon-free, enhanced by the use of the child's own words and drawings. Social workers in the adoption team are skilled in undertaking direct work with children, helping them to understand their histories and enabling them to establish attachment to their new family. This helps children to settle quickly. Foster carers assist with introductions, helping children who are adopted to develop secure attachments to their new parents. There have been no adoption breakdowns, either before or after the making of an adoption order, in the past two years. This reflects the care taken in matching, the work offered to children and the effectiveness of adoption support.
72. Leicester has a rolling recruitment programme and holds monthly information sessions, with 17 adopters being assessed at the time of the inspection. Enquiries receive a prompt response, and staff in the adoption service understand the profile of children waiting in Leicester, ensuring that the right adopters are recruited to meet their needs.
73. Adoption support is a strength. Adopters speak extremely positively about the support that they receive from social workers throughout their adoption journey. Having the opportunity to meet with the medical adviser to discuss potential lifelong or future needs of their child or children is greatly valued. Post-adoption support is timely, and creative, sensitive work helps families to meet challenges. Adoptive families benefit from a wide range of services, and the team makes good use of the adoption support fund.
74. The later-life letters considered by inspectors are of a good quality and written in a sensitive manner, inviting young people to access their files when they reach 18 years of age to help their understanding of their early lives. They contain sufficient detail for older children, with an exploration of how they came to be living with adoptive parents. This will make children's journeys though to adoption easier to understand as they grow older.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement.

75. Considerable work has taken place since the last inspection to improve the quality of service for care leavers. Personal advisers (PAs) in the 16-plus team use their skills and experience effectively to support young people and to develop positive, enduring relationships. Their work shows a good understanding of the range and complexities of young people's lives, including those with mental health needs, those at risk of sexual exploitation, care leavers in custody and those who have recently become parents. Recent data shows that almost all care leavers are in touch with the service, and only two were refusing to engage at the time of the inspection.
76. The local authority continues to invest in the workforce. In addition, training opportunities are helping to improve practice and to strengthen supervision using reflective practice approaches. This is new work which is already beginning to demonstrate a positive impact on some young people's lives, including a review of the pathway planning process and implementation of an improved format. The voice of care leavers is more prominent in these plans, with the best having a stronger focus on helping young people to make positive choices. Caseloads are now more manageable, and work by managers is ongoing to ensure that these are balanced so that the most complex cases are spread equitably across the team.
77. Young people say that they like their PAs and feel well supported by them. Being safe and staying safe are the key themes discussed with them, which they thought was helpful. Risks are carefully and individually assessed, particularly so when considering the allocation of housing and moving towards independence. Detailed discussions and interventions are, in most instances, recorded succinctly and well in case notes. Management oversight is timely and decisive actions are taken to support PAs when this is needed. Young people said that they were usually able to have advice and support via mobile phone, if not always immediately. They expressed concern that there are few opportunities for regular face-to-face contact with PAs and no accessible place to go if they need some urgent help or just space to 'touch base'.
78. Pathway plans are mostly timely, but the quality is not consistently good. Some care leavers' plans are insufficiently detailed and action planning is cursory. In the better plans, decisions are clearly articulated, identifying who is to do what and by when. Information about the involvement with and expectations of relevant agencies and services is explained well. However, the new format is long and repetitive, a view that both care leavers and PAs share. This is therefore still work in progress, and managers were clear that ongoing feedback from PAs and care leavers would be used to further amend and improve the format and the process.

79. Joint transition planning to adult services between the 16-plus team, the disabled children's service and the transition team requires improvement. Managers across teams acknowledge that the process starts too late for some care leavers, often in their mid-17th year, giving them little time to prepare for and explore options about their future needs and aspirations. Arrangements for those care leavers who have the most complex needs, including learning difficulties and disabilities, are prioritised so that their needs are assessed earlier and the relevant services commissioned. (Recommendation)
80. Care leavers know how to access health services when they need them and, with support, most have arranged local registration with a doctor, dentist and optician. Specialist health services are available in the city, including sexual health and drugs and alcohol services, but the lack of a central location for care leavers to access this more sensitive and targeted provision disadvantages them. Care leavers said that they did not feel comfortable attending generic service provision so would choose not to, in some instances. PAs are vigilant, and are proactive if appointments are not kept. Conversely, those care leavers living out of the area are accessing appropriate support from relevant health and specialist services, and this was well recorded in plans.
81. The quality of health information that care leavers receive when they leave the service is unsatisfactory. Medical and health records lack sufficient focus and detail. Health summaries contain limited information from which young people can learn about and understand their health histories and the types of support and services that they have experienced in the past. There is little in the summaries to explain family backgrounds or identify work undertaken on, for example, relationships, risky behaviours or their emotional well-being, all of which have been or may continue to be relevant to their lives. Pathway plans give better attention to health issues, although young people feel that these are not easily accessible to them. (Recommendation)
82. Most 16- to 18-year-old care leavers are in education, employment or training, and there is targeted joint work between the 16-plus service, the virtual school and Connexions to reduce figures in this group of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Currently, 60% of care leavers aged 18- to 21-years-old are in education, employment or training and, of this group, local data reports that 15 are at university. These care leavers are achieving well at university, and the local authority is clearly ambitious for all care leavers to reach their full potential. However, there is still much to do. A high percentage of young people aged between 18- and 21-years-old are NEET. At 38% (79), there has been some, but not sufficient, reduction since the last inspection. (Recommendation)

83. The city council, as the corporate parent and one of the largest city employers, has been too slow to provide ring-fenced opportunities for its care leavers in, for example, work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships across its workforce. There are a number of good training schemes available at local further education colleges and specialist training providers, but too often these programmes do not lead to sustainable employment outcomes. Care leavers said that they had attended some good courses over time, but that they never felt confident enough or well equipped to go for jobs as a result. New funding to improve youth employment, particularly for those who are more vulnerable, has been secured and plans are in development.
84. The achievements of care leavers are celebrated annually at a targeted 16-plus event, and care leavers said that they looked forward to the opportunity to 'get dressed up'. Organised by the corporate parenting panel, attendance at these events is good. All care leavers living locally have access to free leisure passes, and these are well used. For those care leavers living out of the area, discussions are taking place to ensure that a similar offer can be achieved in other local authority areas.
85. The 'staying-put' policy has been revised and improved since the last inspection. Policies and guidance are appropriately targeted for young people, professionals and those foster carers who wish to participate. All care leavers are encouraged to consider this option prior to leaving care, and currently 20 care leavers have chosen to extend their fostering placement. More training is being planned to support foster carers to offer 'staying-put' arrangements with those in their care.
86. Young people are encouraged to develop their independent living skills wherever they live, but not always successfully. Care leavers in independent housing spoke about their struggle to manage finances and to keep on top of managing their homes. PAs have a key role in helping young people to manage their finances and navigate the benefits system. Bespoke packages in supported accommodation are effective in helping young people with additional needs to develop their skills. More targeted work is required to support all care leavers to become more confident and skilled in managing their adult lives independently and successfully.
87. Approximately 95% (194) of care leavers are in suitable accommodation, and placement stability is good. Good partnership arrangements internally between the 16-plus service, the housing department, and private and voluntary sector landlords ensure that allocations meet agreed standards and requirements. The range and quality of accommodation within the city is generally satisfactory or better, with good examples of supported living accommodation and independent tenancy opportunities. The city council has recently agreed to waive the first two weeks' rent when a care leaver moves into their first council tenancy in the city so that they can settle in more quickly and start to manage their finances responsibly. This is in addition to receipt of the leaving care grant, and is commendable.

88. Care leavers' records demonstrate timely and appropriate interventions, resulting in young people being allocated safe accommodation and with appropriate services in place to meet individual needs. Prompt action is taken on those occasions when agreements break down or become untenable. Risk and protective factors regarding a young person's safety and well-being are prioritised when accommodation and support are needed. Policy prohibits the use of bed and breakfast type accommodation and none has been used in the last 12 months.

89. The views of care leavers are canvassed through their regular contact with the 16-plus service and through surveys and events arranged by the Children in Care Council, which a small number of care leavers attend. Care leavers know about their entitlement to services and they receive good support to access information about their legal rights, and the benefits and financial help that they can receive. Advocacy by PAs and the children's rights officers is used well by care leavers, who are supported to complain when necessary, for example about housing allocations, parental rights and access to services.

Leadership, management and governance	Good
<p>Summary</p> <p>Corporate and political leaders have been very effective in working together to improve services for children and families in Leicester City. As a leadership group that knows its services well through carefully scrutinising regular and up-to-date information about strengths, weaknesses and changes in performance, it has built plans upon a firm foundation to deliver a clear vision for children’s services for the future. The local authority agreed appropriate priorities following the last inspection, which have resulted in improvements against each area that was identified and led to safer services for children and families. These include improving initial responses to referrals so that children in need of a social care service, or those who would benefit from early-help support, receive assessment and services in a timely way.</p> <p>The local authority established a detailed performance management and quality assurance model that delivers high-quality information and data. Additionally, this new model has supported a radical change in culture, due to managers at all levels being regularly held to account for their area’s performance.</p> <p>Senior leaders have improved the wider culture of children’s social care. They have moved it to an environment where staff feel safe, are keen to share concerns and are open to learning. This cultural shift demonstrates the strength of senior leaders in Leicester City and is a substantial improvement since the last inspection.</p> <p>The local authority continues to have high use of agency staff. However, it has been successful in recruiting permanent senior and team managers. Recruitment to permanent social work posts is beginning to increase, including attracting a large number of newly qualified social workers into the authority.</p> <p>Senior managers and officers demonstrate a high level of commitment to their corporate parenting role, and the corporate parenting forum is chaired effectively by the lead member for children’s services. However, almost all other elected members are not demonstrating that they have high aspirations for children looked after.</p> <p>A relevant range of services is commissioned to support children and their families. However, these are commissioned individually, rather than being agreed against local need and as part of a broader commissioning strategy. Placement sufficiency is met through a mix of in-house and externally purchased placements. The sufficiency strategy does not inform current provision or future planning.</p> <p>The quality of services for children looked after has been maintained effectively during the period of improvement in the management of referrals, child in need and child protection services. However, services for disabled children have not received the same proactive oversight.</p>	

Inspection findings

90. Senior leaders galvanised full political and corporate support to ensure that services to children and their families improved following the last inspection. Leaders have appropriately targeted their improvement plans, and this has led to an improved response and intervention for children in need of social care and for those who would benefit from early-help services. The strategic director for children's services has received solid commitment and support from the city mayor and the lead member for children to successfully drive these improvements forward. No children were found to be at immediate risk of unassessed harm during this inspection.
91. Senior leaders have worked closely together and kept investments to the children's improvement agenda at a reasonable level to ensure that changes can be sustained in the longer term. Investment has therefore been made in tangible developments, such as the positive move to improved accommodation for the majority of social work teams, providing social workers with laptops and mobile telephones so that they can work effectively while out in the community. Workers value these investments highly. Investment has also been made to strengthen senior management capacity, quality assurance and performance management. The local authority has appropriate plans to continue current arrangements until consistently stronger practice is in place across children's social care.
92. Following the last inspection, senior leaders improved their contact with frontline workers. This identified a need to change the culture and working environment for staff to being open and safe. Changing this negative culture quickly became a major priority for senior leaders. Through regular meetings with staff, senior leaders, including the director of children's services and the lead member for children's services, ensured that they fully understood and responded to the issues raised. Development and learning opportunities were also put in place. These include an exciting partnership with De Montfort University to share skills and learning, and twilight training sessions to support workers to refocus on their own development and to improve the quality of their work with children and families. These elements led to a substantial improvement in the culture of children's social care. During this inspection, inspectors found staff engaging in open dialogues with managers, and feeling safe and confident to challenge issues.
93. Effective working relationships are evident across the senior leadership team. These includes relationships across strategic boards such as the children, young people and schools' scrutiny commission, the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) and the Health and Wellbeing Board. While the work of the LSCB and scrutiny commission directly links with the improvement agenda in children's social care, it is unclear how the Health and Wellbeing Board influences the children's social care agenda. The chief operating officer now holds the LSCB chair directly to account through regular meetings and review against their agreed set of priorities. This is an improvement since the last inspection.

94. The local authority does not currently have an up-to-date commissioning strategy. Over recent months, it has reviewed children's and families' needs through updating the children's and young people's joint strategic needs assessment, and has mapped current provision of services. However, it is only at the earliest stages of considering its strategy going forwards. This is now a key priority for the local authority. (Recommendation)
95. Despite this, a suitable range of services has been individually commissioned to meet identified need, such as support for young carers and the highly valued multi-systemic therapy. Many of these services have been commissioned following good practice in consultation with children and partners from other agencies, and contracts appropriately include requirements such as adherence to safer recruitment and safeguarding practices. Outcomes are improving for children and young people because of commissioned services. For example, because of interventions through the domestic and sexual violence specialist contract, schools reported a 79% increase in attendance at school for those accessing support.
96. The local authority's sufficiency strategy is weak. It does not identify the needs of the current population of children looked after or the anticipated demand going forward. It also fails to consider the range of placements that are required in order to meet the sufficiency duty. While this is clearly a deficit, managers are minimising the impact for individual children through spot-purchasing external placements to meet their needs. (Recommendation)
97. The corporate parenting forum is chaired by the lead member and is very well attended by a wide range of officers who maintain an increasingly effective oversight of services to children looked after and care leavers. The corporate parenting forum engages directly with children and young people from the Children in Care Council. Children and young people attend every meeting and are supported to engage fully with discussions. The forum actively pursues improvements to services for children looked after and care leavers. For example, at its most recent meeting an exciting pilot was agreed to support care leavers into their council tenancies by having a rent-free period to help them to set up their new home. Performance information is provided to the forum and is an area still in development so that it includes, for example, placement stability data and greater exploration of return home interviews, including the number being declined by children.
98. Elected members are not demonstrating high aspirations for children looked after or a commitment to their corporate parenting role, with only two elected members attending the vast majority of meetings. The chair has attempted to secure greater commitment from members, for example through identifying a small group of members to take a special interest in children looked after and offering specialist training, but this has not led to any improvements to date. (Recommendation)

99. The local authority has made exceptional progress in embedding a stronger performance management culture, from a very low base at the time of the last inspection. The change in culture is rooted in clear and reliable performance data that is available to managers and leaders across the local authority, with regular performance meetings and a performance board which holds managers to account for their area's performance. The creative style of audits, both a traditional style review of case records and observations of practice with children and families, ensures that leaders and managers understand the quality of the full range of work with, and for, children and their families. High-quality quarterly reports are in an accessible format for both political leaders and officers. They draw on a wide range of information, including performance data, audits and outcomes from complaints. This ensures that senior leaders understand children's social care very well, and they track changes in performance swiftly in order to identify areas for proactive and focused action in the following quarter.
100. The local authority's plans to continue to improve standards of social work and management oversight are effective. Although widespread consistency in the quality of work with children and families has not yet been achieved, it is clear that compliance with key social work tasks has improved significantly since the last inspection and that the quality of social work is beginning to improve. The recording of decision-making by team and service managers has also significantly improved since the last inspection, yet some further input is required to gain consistency in the quality of management oversight.
101. While the local authority focused its attention on the 'front door' and children in need services, this led to a lack of tangible improvements in services to children looked after. Importantly though, the quality of these services was maintained during this challenging time, and adoption performance has seen some improvement. The service for disabled children has experienced a high turnover of staff, including managers, which has not led to robust child in need and child protection practices. Following emerging findings from inspectors, the local authority undertook further audits of children's cases within the disabled children's service during this inspection and is now clearly sighted on the issues. Senior managers are now considering how to ensure that these vulnerable children receive improved and equitable services. (Recommendation)

102. The local authority places a high value on ensuring that it seeks and understands the views of children and young people, including vulnerable children. It also has effective mechanisms in place to ensure that their views inform service developments. Children and young people who access the well-resourced participation service are provided with the training and support that they need to engage fully in key strategic meetings, and young advisers are financially compensated for their time. Roles include working as mystery shoppers and young inspectors, and consulting on a range of projects, including 'youth proofing' documents such as the new reflective supervision tool. The 'How will you hear me' films are a very powerful resource, developed from children's and young people's own experiences, to help professionals to reflect on their skills in really listening to and understanding children's views, wishes and feelings. Children from the Children in Care Council are also well supported to contribute to surveys of children looked after, to feed into the corporate parenting forum, and to inform thinking and decisions within the forum. Currently, training is underway to increase the pool of children and young people able to sit on interview panels to ensure that these important decisions reflect the views of children and young people.
103. The local authority has positively addressed its formerly poor working relationships with the Children and Family Court Advice and Support Service and the courts. The director of children's social care and early help now chairs the local family justice board. This has increased confidence among partners that the local authority is serious about improving working relationships and also that it is keen to be key partners in reducing avoidable delay in care proceedings and delivering effective legal interventions for children. Local authority officers also sit as members of the sub-groups linked to the board and actively contribute to the sharing of good practice and developments in training.
104. Supervision of social workers and managers is improving. The large majority of staff now receive regular supervision, and managers swiftly address aspects of poor performance. Performance reviews are not undertaken for all staff, and the follow-up of actions is not yet routine between one supervision session and the next, which means that tracking progress for children is not always sufficiently thorough.
105. The local authority has been successful in recruiting to senior manager and team manager posts, and will have a near-full complement of permanent managers by September this year. However, there is still high reliance on agency staff, particularly in the single assessment teams and child in need service. Additionally, some agency workers are in place to enable the new single assessment team to function, and others fill the 0.5 posts put in place to support social workers who are in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYEs). (Recommendation)

106. Despite these workforce challenges, managers have successfully reduced the number of changes in social worker experienced by children by over 60% in the past year. Furthermore, senior managers are seeking to reduce the impact of social worker changes for children and they now ensure that, whenever possible, transfers between workers are managed so that there is a handover and sense of continuity for children. The local authority has attracted effectively a large number of ASYEs to work in children's social care, through targeted recruitment and an improved offer of support during their assessed year. It has also just agreed plans to offer apprenticeships to some early-help workers to support them through to a professional qualification.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

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The inspection team consisted of six of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

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