

Inspection of Oxfordshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 12 to 23 February 2024

Lead inspector: Nicki Shaw, His Majesty's Inspector

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

The experiences and progress of children and young people in Oxfordshire are good across all aspects of the inspection framework. Leaders have made good progress in addressing the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection in 2018 and at the focused visit in 2020. The quality of practice for children in need of help and protection has improved since the inspection in 2018, when it was judged as 'requires improvement', meaning that children now receive effective and timely support.

The senior leadership team has experienced significant turnover during the past 18 months. The stability of longer-standing operational leaders and the middle management team has helped to maintain and improve the quality of service delivery during this period. Additional investment has also enabled services to be developed and strengthened. The newly appointed permanent director of children's services, together with political and corporate leaders, are committed to, and ambitious for, children and young people. They have a good understanding of what is working well and the areas for ongoing improvement.

What needs to improve?

- The timeliness of actions when decisions have been made for children to escalate to the pre-proceedings arrangements of the Public Law Outline.
- Multi-agency arrangements within children's and adult services to promote information-sharing, analysis of risk and planning for care leavers who misuse drugs and alcohol, engage in criminal behaviours and are at risk of, or are, being exploited.
- The work, together with corporate leaders, to increase the range and take-up by care leavers of employment, education and training opportunities.
- The quality of direct work with disabled children who are in care.

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

1. Children and young people who need help and protection receive proportionate and timely support. Early help arrangements are comprehensive, with good partnership engagement. Children's needs are addressed at the earliest opportunity. Partner agencies work together to deliver help that minimises the risk of children's needs escalating. When their needs do increase, children benefit from timely referrals and with the family's knowledge. Responses to referrals are robust, with a system of oversight to ensure that the concerns are clear and that actions are progressed in a way that helps to keep children safer.
2. The quality and timeliness of assessments are good and include clear analysis of children's and families' needs and strengths. These lead to well-informed recommendations and plans. Children and families receive help during the assessment phase, which improves situations for children and helps to reduce the need for longer-term support. Pre-birth assessments are timely, proportionate to risk and result in appropriate recommendations to safeguard unborn babies. This is an improvement since the inspection in 2018.
3. Assessments of children experiencing neglect are now informed by a comprehensive evidence-based assessment tool. Practice has improved for children since the previous inspection. Specialist assessments are commissioned to help professionals identify and understand vulnerable parents' needs. This helps to ensure that children have the benefit of effective planning and intervention to reduce risk and vulnerability. The style of writing used in assessments is accessible so that parents and carers can understand the concerns and what could happen if children's circumstances do not improve.
4. Plans are well written and describe how parents will be supported to make the changes necessary to meet their children's needs. Children are helped by skilled practitioners who deliver high-quality interventions. These include very practical

support to parents with additional learning needs. Positive role modelling by practitioners helps these parents to improve their parenting skills.

5. Strategy meetings and section 47 investigations are timely and well supported by partner agencies. This enables families and professionals to have a good understanding of risks and strengths and leads to effective plans to reduce the risk of harm to children. Partner agency attendance at child protection conferences has improved since the last inspection. Children subject to a child-in-need or child protection plan receive the necessary help to reduce risk. Child-in-need meetings and core groups are well attended by partner agencies and families, and by children if appropriate. Meetings are well led and plans and actions are reviewed and updated. Achievements are recognised, and areas that are not progressing are identified and actions agreed. Step-up and step-down arrangements as risks change are robust so that children are supported at the appropriate level.
6. Families benefit from a range of specialist services, including clinical support, to reduce risks to children because of parental domestic abuse and substance misuse. Social workers arrange these effectively to support families to make progress, and children are safer as a result. Social work visits to children are regular and children are seen in line with their needs. Child-focused direct work by social workers is an area of strength, with sensitive and creative direct work enabling children to be heard so that their plans are influenced by their experiences, wishes and feelings.
7. Children and families benefit from timely and effective intervention by the family group conference service. Plans developed by families to safeguard and support children have enabled children to remain living within their family networks.
8. Supervision for social workers supporting families who need help and protection is regular and addresses risk. However, some supervision is brief and task-focused, which can mean that not all children's circumstances, or changes to their situations, are fully explored and then addressed.
9. Children who go missing, and those at risk of exploitation, receive a robust multi-agency response and targeted support, with regular senior oversight for those most at risk.
10. Skilled and thoughtful social workers supporting disabled children know their children very well. They are alert to changes in children's facial expressions and behaviour which may indicate that they are happy or distressed. Disabled children are well supported by lower-level packages of care when required. Those who need more specialist support are visited more frequently in accordance with their needs.

11. The work during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is mostly strong. The arrangements are used appropriately, and successfully divert many families from entering court proceedings. For a small number of children, there is significant delay between decisions being made to enter pre-proceedings and actions being taken. Court applications are timely for most children and ensure that the right children receive the protection they require at the right time, although a small number are held in the pre-proceedings stage for too long.
12. Children who are at risk of homelessness receive a swift response. Reunification work is offered, and a range of resources are available to support this. When children cannot return to their family, they are offered care arrangements with placements sourced according to their needs. Short-term beds in supported accommodation are available with support from a commissioned service while assessments take place; long-term supported accommodation is also an option.
13. The local authority designated officer service responds appropriately to allegations against adults who may pose a risk to children. Good-quality record-keeping and a comprehensive tracker enable managers to have effective oversight of all information referred to the service.
14. A well-resourced emergency duty service responds in good time to referred concerns and provides timely practical help when this is needed.
15. Children living in private fostering arrangements are visited within seven days of the initial notification. Assessments are completed in a timely way and are comprehensive and child-centred. Potential risks to children are carefully explored. Children are visited within timescales, which helps to ensure that their needs are met promptly.
16. Young carers are identified through assessments which take into account their experiences and consider the strengths and needs within the family. All young carers receive good support, although leaders recognise that services are more developed in some areas of the county.
17. The oversight of elective home education is a strength of the local authority's work. There is an effective system for tracking the increasing numbers of children who are educated at home. The local authority has robust systems to work with other agencies to identify and support children who may be at increased risk of harm.
18. There are clear procedures to identify and monitor children who are missing education, working positively with families, schools and other agencies to determine and address the main barriers to education. The strong communication between professionals ensures that risk indicators are quickly identified and acted on.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

19. Decision-making for children to come into care is appropriate and timely. Leaders are well sighted on children's journeys from entering care to permanence, through a system of panels, tracking and quality assurance. Senior leaders know individual children and the issues affecting their permanence journey well. Decisions are made based on full consideration of the child's needs.
20. Social workers have a good understanding of their children and of their route into care. Many children have stable relationships with their social workers, who undertake creative life-story and direct work. A range of age-appropriate tools are used so that children are able to understand their plans. The quality of direct work for disabled children in care is not as strong, so they are not helped in the same way to understand their care journey.
21. Some children told inspectors how difficult it was for them when their social worker changed. The local authority has identified that workforce turnover has had an impact on these children; a robust workforce strategy is strengthening workforce retention.
22. Children in care are supported to maintain relationships with people who are important to them. Project work with children supports them to reconnect with their family and to strengthen reunification when possible. Consideration of kinship arrangements is a priority for those children who cannot remain safely at home with their parents. This ensures that children move to live with people who they know and trust. Supporting brothers and sisters to live together is also carefully considered.
23. Social workers visit children regularly and at a frequency that is right for them, including those who live outside of Oxfordshire. Decisions to move children are child-centred and well considered and informed by children expressing a wish to live closer to their family networks or to maintain their school placements.
24. Children benefit from independent reviewing officers who routinely see them outside of their statutory reviews; children really appreciate this. Parents and professionals attend children's reviews, so relevant information is shared, and children's emerging needs are considered in plans. Records of children's reviews are clear and written to the child, using caring language that they will understand. Actions are tracked, which strengthens professional accountability and responsibilities, to ensure that children are supported to improve their experiences and progress.
25. Children have access to independent visitors and advocates who help them to understand their rights and entitlements and to be heard on matters that are important to them.

26. Responses to children in care who go missing and are at risk of exploitation are robust. This work is undertaken by a specialist team with expertise in the vulnerabilities and risks associated with extra-familial harm. This ensures that interventions are highly individualised and creative, according to the child's needs. Children benefit from relationship-based support, with workers taking time to build trusting relationships; these relationships form the basis for helping children to keep themselves safer and move forward positively in their lives. Children make significant progress as a result.
27. There is high ambition expressed by the virtual school, linked to the vision, 'Access, Engage, Excel'. Children have benefited from the strong partnership work between the virtual school and schools to support them to remain in education and reduce suspensions and exclusions. The work of the virtual school is highly valued by stakeholders. School staff value the support they receive and the strong lines of communication, alongside the wide training offer. They appreciate the virtual school's involvement in the creation and timing of personal education plans.
28. Children's physical health needs are met through regular health reviews. Their emotional needs are promptly identified and responded to through Oxfordshire's highly regarded clinical therapeutic services.
29. Children are supported by committed foster carers who understand their diverse and complex needs and work effectively with them to develop purposeful and trusting relationships. Children report that their carers advocate strongly on their behalf. Children are supported to remain with their foster carers post-18 through 'staying put' arrangements to maintain their family links and stability. This has enabled care leavers to successfully continue their journeys into employment and further education.
30. The adoption service, which is part of a regional adoption agency (Adopt Thames Valley), is managed well to ensure that children who have a plan for adoption in Oxfordshire and those adults who come forward as adopters receive high-quality, effective services. Children are carefully matched with adopters, and transition arrangements are sensitively managed. Well-thought-out transitions include birth parents whenever possible. Adopters and prospective adopters value the training, support and services they receive throughout their adoption journey. Those who seek further support once the adoption is finalised are also positive about the quality of this response.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

31. Care leavers are helped by skilled and caring personal advisers (PAs) who are proactive in supporting them to achieve their potential. PAs are responsive to care leavers' needs and are highly attuned to their emotional well-being. Care leavers know how to make complaints and have access to managers if they are unhappy about the support being provided.

32. Intervention with care leavers is captured well through lively records, highlighting their voices and experiences, and written directly to them. Care leavers are routinely advised about how they can see their records, and some access information about their earlier lives with the sensitive support of PAs.
33. PAs start direct work with care leavers around their 18th birthdays. However, this is too late and weakens the effectiveness of transition planning. Leaders recognise this and are currently reviewing their policy.
34. As care leavers approach 21, a discussion is held about their future needs. Care leavers who need or want a PA are transferred to a post-21 PA. The system ensures that all care leavers can access support up to the age of 25. Care leavers are helped to stay in touch with their former carers, who often remain influential and important figures as they progress into adulthood. Care leavers are also supported to maintain other important relationships.
35. Many care leavers appreciate the impactful help that they receive, including a range of practical assistance. They also value the emotional support available to them. Care leavers who are parents receive good practical and emotional support to manage the demands of young parenthood.
36. Care leavers who arrive in the UK as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by social workers who get to know them well. They live in suitable homes and are helped to learn English and to develop their independence skills. The effective partnership work between the virtual school and education providers ensures that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers are supported to develop their talents and realise their career aspirations.
37. Risks to some care leavers who misuse drugs and alcohol, engage in criminal behaviours and are at risk of, or are being, exploited, are recognised. However, there is not always a coordinated adult safeguarding response. This means that opportunities for structured information-sharing, and multi-agency analysis of multiple recurring risks, are not always considered. Leaders are working with partners to ensure a timelier multi-agency response to care leavers in these circumstances.
38. Most care leavers are proactively supported into purposeful education, employment and training opportunities. When this is not the case, PAs make determined efforts to encourage and support care leavers to access and test a range of opportunities. Corporate initiatives are planned, and some are in progress, to provide more purposeful and substantial apprenticeships, training and employment opportunities for care leavers who do not enter higher education. The small minority of care leavers who attend college and university are well supported financially and most can live with their former foster carers during vacations.

39. Care leavers have up-to-date pathway plans that are co-produced with their PA. Their needs are regularly reassessed through six-monthly reviews which are, in most cases, timely. This means that new and emerging needs are captured and evaluated. A new co-produced pathway plan format has been recently introduced. This strengthens care leavers' voices and increases the focus on their current needs.
40. Many care leavers benefit from the current local offer, which has helped them to make good progress into adulthood. The offer on the local authority website is not written in easily accessible language, so some care leavers may not fully understand what is available to them. Leaders are revising the offer, together with care leavers. In the meantime, PAs pay detailed and thorough attention to care leavers' financial and practical needs and entitlements so that they receive the necessary support.
41. Most care leavers live in accommodation that is suitable for their needs and circumstances. Their independence skills are carefully developed, and most do not live independently until they are ready. When they live outside of the county, PAs work with the host local authority to secure suitable accommodation. Care leavers are also proactively supported to gain access to education and health services to address their needs. The supply of social housing in Oxfordshire is very limited. Care leavers receive flexible support from a housing provider at a level that is right for them. This can be adapted to reflect care leavers' emerging needs. The number of care leavers 'staying put' with their foster carers has recently increased. Care leavers in Oxfordshire are exempt from council tax.
42. PAs pay close attention to care leavers' physical health, and they are diligent in their efforts to help care leavers access help with their emotional and mental health needs. Care leavers can access the local authority's clinical therapeutic service. They also have access to their health summaries.

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

43. The chief executive officer (CEO) is ambitious for children and has a good understanding of the priorities for improving the lives of the most vulnerable children. The CEO and lead member are well informed about the strengths and areas for development across the service through regular meetings with the director and through high-quality performance reports. There has been significant and substantial turnover in the senior leadership of Oxfordshire over the past 18 months. The stability provided by some longer-standing operational and middle-managers has helped to maintain and improve services during this time.

44. Strong political and corporate support has continued and has ensured that the children's directorate has received ongoing investment to develop and strengthen services for vulnerable children. This includes investment in Oxfordshire's children's home strategy, financial support for the chosen social work practice model, fostering recruitment and retention and additional programme management to support continuous improvement. Children in care and care leavers have benefited from strong corporate parenting.
45. The local children's safeguarding partnership arrangements provide governance and scrutiny through ongoing consideration of the impact and effectiveness of services for vulnerable children. Work to address the needs of children experiencing neglect, to reduce drift and to improve management oversight, was overseen by a group within the safeguarding partnership. This has led to an improved response to these vulnerable children and effective use of a specialist tool to inform assessments.
46. Children and young people have long waits to access child and adolescent mental health services in the county. The potential impact of this is mitigated by the in-house clinical team that provides therapeutic support to children and care leavers. Children waiting for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments can access the pupil premium to ensure a timely response to their needs.
47. Leaders have developed effective specialist services for children at risk of exploitation. They ensure that children at high risk of exploitation, and those who are missing, are reviewed, and safety steps are planned at multi-agency meetings chaired by senior leaders. A multi-agency strategic meeting considers cross-cutting risks and develops approaches to address these. This supports practitioners in their work to keep children safer.
48. Feedback from the judiciary is positive about the practice in Oxfordshire, noting that the courts see the right children coming into care at the right time for them, including children who have experienced neglect. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service reports strong working relationships with the local authority. The local authority is regarded as a willing partner that plays a full role in developing the family justice network and improving practice.
49. A comprehensive sufficiency strategy has identified key gaps in provision across Oxfordshire, created by pressures on the service and national and local trends. Senior managers have recognised shortfalls in securing in-house and commissioned foster homes and plans are in place to improve the range of provision. This includes the development of five new children's homes, following a successful bid for Department for Education (DfE) funding and local authority investment. These additional local places are intended to reduce the need for out-of-county care arrangements and to enable children with the most complex needs to remain living near their families and the people who are important to them.

50. A very small number of children are living temporarily in unregistered children's homes. Robust oversight arrangements are in place while commissioners search for registered provision.
51. Leaders are committed to continuous improvement of practice and the development of a strong learning culture and they achieve this through performance and practice quality assurance processes. Senior leaders know themselves and their service well. The self-evaluation is comprehensive and provides a clear appraisal of service strengths, challenges and areas for development. External scrutiny is invited by the local authority to challenge and test the quality of children's services and the impact of leaders in influencing and driving improvements. Leaders are acting on feedback from a recent peer review to improve services.
52. Oxfordshire has a comprehensive performance framework. A monthly service-based practice challenge and support event and the introduction of 'Driving quality and improvement in performance and practice' are influencing and having a positive impact on the quality of services for children.
53. The quality assurance process has significantly improved since the focused visit in 2020. The audit tool is now comprehensive and structured to evaluate the quality of social work practice effectively throughout the child's journey from referral to intervention. A panel of managers oversees the compliance, quality and impact of audits, and this is providing assurance to leaders.
54. Children's services have a robust workforce strategy that is overseen by a workforce development board. A determined focus on recruitment and retention activity is helping to increase the number of permanent staff in the service. For example, the local authority has been successful in attracting agency staff to convert to permanent employment and has secured DfE funding for 20 social work apprenticeships. Other routes into social work are also available in children's services. The Social Work Professional Development Centre supports newly qualified social workers and international social work recruits to develop competence aligned to practice standards.
55. Current caseloads enable social workers to support children and families effectively. The local authority's preferred practice model is embedded across the service. Strengths-based relational practice is well evidenced in children's records.
56. Learning and development opportunities are available to staff, as well as career progression pathways. Children's practitioners are supported to develop skills in specialist areas of work. Most social workers are supported through supervision and through access to senior managers, who demonstrate good oversight and a keen interest in the work.

57. Staff feel supported by their managers and describe leaders as 'approachable' and 'visible'. The achievements of staff are valued and celebrated by leaders in an annual awards ceremony and corporate long-standing awards.

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