

Inspection of Telford and Wrekin local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 29 April to 3 May 2024

Lead inspector: Rebecca Quested, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children and families in Telford and Wrekin continue to experience exceptional social work practice when they are in care and as care leavers. Innovative social work practice means that many more children are now benefiting from early help within Family Hubs. More children who experience social work intervention are now being supported to live permanently within their family networks without children's services involvement when appropriate. Participation is a real strength and children's and families' involvement is threaded throughout service developments.

Senior leaders at Telford and Wrekin Council have continued to implement ambitious plans which prioritise the needs of children and young people. Political and financial support is crucial to this success. Since the last inspection in 2020, there has been a focus on improving the effectiveness of plans, the recording of management decisions and significant improvement in the use of pre-proceedings to enable more children to remain living safely within kinship care. Senior leaders know there is more to do to improve the management of contacts within Family Connect, the multi-agency safeguarding hub, and to ensure that 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless are consistently made aware of their rights and entitlements to become accommodated by the local authority.

What needs to improve?

- The management of contacts within Family Connect.
- The consistency of making children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless aware of their rights and entitlements.

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

1. The Strengthening Families service makes a positive difference to children's lives. The development of Family Hubs has increased the capacity of the early help service to support children's needs when they are first identified. Partners support detailed and outcome-focused interventions that are proportionate to children's and families' needs. Effective management oversight supports the progression of plans as well as the appropriate escalation of concerns into Family Connect. Strengthening Families workers continue to have a role when required, providing continuity of relationships for children and their families.
2. For the majority of children, the correct thresholds are applied in Family Connect. Initial contacts are mostly processed swiftly. Professional advice provided by senior social workers and decision-making by team managers to Family Connect advisers is not consistently recorded. Contacts are closed and reopened to extend the time period for screening. This means that there is not a timely response to concerns for a small number of children. This also impacts on senior leaders' understanding of the responsiveness of the service in managing contacts.
3. There is inconsistency in the understanding and application of parental consent when professionals call Family Connect for advice. The information is sometimes recorded as a contact before parental consent is sought.
4. A consistent approach to information-sharing within Family Connect means that responses to children who have been exposed to risks of domestic abuse are prompt and proportionate to ensure their well-being and safety. Agreement for the police to triage domestic abuse concerns makes sure that children's services are now able to focus their responses where they are most needed.
5. When concerns about children involve risk of exploitation, they are screened promptly. Consultation offered by the Children Abused Through Exploitation (CATE) team provides additional advice to inform analysis.
6. Social workers in Family Connect make effective use of family histories to understand current concerns and risks to children. This is further enhanced by the information gathered from the right partners to understand children's circumstances. Social workers' analysis of risks and needs leads to well-timed recommendations and actions that reduce risks to children.

7. Strategy meetings are timely, with consistently strong engagement from partners. Meetings are effective in using all the information from partners and family history to reflect the risks to children, including those within the wider family. Actions are clear and focus on immediate protection, with children being seen on the same day as the strategy meeting. Child protection investigations ensure that sufficient information is gathered to understand the concerns and to make appropriate decisions for next steps. Most enquiries consider interim safety planning for children, with clear management oversight for next steps.
8. Children and families benefit from comprehensive assessments. Managers provide strong oversight, with clear direction about assessment expectations and timescales. Social workers are skilled in building relationships quickly with children and families, focusing on their strengths, and are sensitive to the cultural and religious needs of children. Assessments include an understanding of family history and the current concerns and risks. They are appropriately focused on children's needs and how the family network can provide support.
9. A dedicated Parenting Assessment team ensures that parents benefit from prompt and detailed assessment which thoroughly analyses their parenting ability and capacity to change. This means that early permanence can be secured for children within their family network when assessments take place pre-birth, within the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline and proceedings.
10. Children's plans, whether they need help or protection, consider children's needs and are effective and clear as to the actions required to address concerns or risk. Social workers use targeted services that help to support parents in reducing risks to children. Plans are regularly reviewed in well-attended multi-agency meetings. Actions are child-focused, which helps to ensure that positive change is achieved within a meaningful timescale.
11. Multidisciplinary working improves children's experiences. Adult practitioners provide targeted work with parents to support them to meet their children's needs. Social workers benefit from consultation about their children with psychologists, which enables them to consider wider issues when working with families.
12. Children and families involved in pre-proceedings benefit from strong multi-agency support. This area of practice has improved since the last visit in 2022. Children benefit from the creative use of financial support accessible through the Family Networks pilot. Leaders routinely track and review pre-proceedings so that social workers and managers understand what needs to happen and when. This work is highly effective in maintaining children within their families and ensures timely completion of care proceedings when they are issued.
13. Children benefit from an experienced team of specialist exploitation workers in the CATE team who provide an exceptional service for children when they are exploited or at risk of exploitation. They skilfully build relationships with children

and their families, which supports the reduction of risk and improvement in children's experiences. This includes disruption activity and referral to the National Referral Mechanism. An innovative and effective multi-agency transition panel plans services and interventions for children into adulthood.

14. The Family Solutions team continues to provide a comprehensive range of interventions which skilfully support children to remain safely at home and to leave care to return to their family. This includes the effective use of family group conferences. Workers are tenacious, creative and highly successful in diverting children from entering care or supporting them to return to kinship care.
15. Social workers understand the impact neglect has on children's lives. There is an improved focus on exploring parental capacity for sustainable change. The use of a new social work practice model is providing a framework for timelier and tailored coordinated interventions in response to neglect.
16. Children benefit from an effective response from the out-of-hours team. Information-sharing with partners enables social workers to make appropriate decisions about whether children need to be immediately safeguarded.
17. Social workers know their children well and have developed effective relationships with parents, which enables them to understand concerns and what needs to change. Children are visited regularly and social workers use games, play and conversation to build trusting relationships.
18. Social workers understand disabled children's needs well. They are creative in how they seek children's views, using a variety of tools to support children's communication needs. Comprehensive assessments consider the family's wide-ranging needs, and packages of support ensure that the needs of both disabled children and their brothers and sisters are met.
19. Children who live in private fostering arrangements receive excellent support. They benefit from appropriate oversight and regular visits, which makes sure that they feel safe and that their wishes are heard.
20. The identification and support for children who are young carers is underdeveloped. Consequently, leaders cannot be assured that young carers are consistently identified, their needs are assessed, and appropriate help is provided.
21. Children who are aged 16 and 17 benefit from a joint assessment by children's social care and housing when they present as homeless. This means that children's wide-ranging needs are considered. Children are provided with emergency accommodation by housing while assessments are undertaken. However, children are not consistently made aware of their rights and entitlements, including to be accommodated. As a result, vulnerable children are not always clear on the options available to them when they are homeless. This was identified as a shortfall during the last inspection in 2020.

22. Children who are missing from education or are electively home educated are identified promptly and appropriate steps are taken to ensure their safety through well-established multi-agency cooperation. This is mostly effective in pinpointing underlying causes that become the focus for support to mitigate risk.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

23. Children come into care at a time that is right for them. When possible, children remain living within kinship care, which supports children to maintain their identity. When this is not possible, alternative permanence options are fully considered. There is clear management oversight at the point of decision-making which enables children, should they access their records, to understand how such an important decision in their life has been made.

24. Children's care plans are aspirational. They are thorough and address children's specific needs. They are independently reviewed, with the relevant people in children's lives contributing to the meeting.

25. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) carry out visits to children before meetings. Children attend their own reviews to contribute their wishes and feelings when they wish to. Reviews are thoughtfully written to the child. IROs provide oversight of plans between reviews to make sure that children's plans continue to progress.

26. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive exceptionally high-quality care. This includes a rapid response at the earliest point of identification, with a well-coordinated offer of immediate support and decisions to accommodate made promptly. Positive relationships with the right partnerships mean that children's wide-ranging needs are well met, including access to legal advice. As a result, children are settled and supported and do not go missing.

27. Disabled children in care benefit from living in homes that meet their needs. Social workers are highly skilled in creative direct work that is individual to the child. This work ensures that children are supported to have a voice about their care experience and progress.

28. When children live away from Telford and Wrekin, this is based on their assessed needs and they continue to receive the same level of service had they been closer to home.

29. Children in care benefit from dedicated social workers who know them well and understand their needs, wishes and feelings. Children are visited according to their needs. Records are skilfully written to them and reflect the positive relationships children have with workers and carers. Children are encouraged to engage in positive hobbies and activities which support their interests and development.

30. Family time is promoted and there are clear arrangements for children to spend time with those who matter to them. Social workers and IROs establish children's views, wishes and anxieties about how well family time is progressing and adapt it to meet their needs.
31. Children in care who met inspectors were extremely positive about participation opportunities. They enjoy the help they receive from the virtual school, which provides them with a wide range of participation activities and numerous social events. Children said they feel cared about and that the adults in their lives are genuinely proud of them and their achievements.
32. When children go missing from home or from care, they are offered timely return home interviews. There is effective engagement of children by the specialist CATE team in this process, which enables them to explore the push-and-pull factors for children. Through detailed direct work, social workers explore children's feelings about where they want to live. For some children, this has resulted in them moving and incidents of going missing have stopped.
33. Children's emotional and physical health needs are well considered. Children's health assessments and dental appointments are up to date. Telford and Wrekin children's services has a specialist therapeutic team which provides consultation for social workers to identify and provide the appropriate emotional support for children. For some children, their health needs are fulfilled through bespoke independent therapeutic and psychological support.
34. The virtual school is a significant strength in Telford and Wrekin. Highly effective systems and processes are used well to ensure that children in care access quality education. An extensive range of social, educational and cultural opportunities help them to develop their talents and interests and prepare them for later life. Children's views are considered at every stage.
35. Children who return to live with their parents benefit from comprehensive assessments that consider parents' ability to sustain change and meet children's needs in the long term. Consultations take place with the specialist therapeutic team to make sure that the right services are in place to support families. Social workers and IROs maintain strong oversight of children's progress to ensure that they can continue to live safely at home with their parents. Senior leaders have oversight and provide a rationale to support decision-making.
36. When children are living in kinship care through special guardianship orders (SGOs), the assessments are equally thorough. This enables social workers to make sure that the right support is in place for special guardians to be able to meet children's needs.
37. Children in care benefit from living in supportive permanent foster care homes which enable them to thrive both at home and at school or college. Where

children have a plan of long-term fostering, social workers focus on securing permanence for them through matching with foster carers. When children need to move, they and their families are involved in decisions about where they will move to. This supports children's investment in their new home.

38. Children are cared for by foster carers who are appropriately skilled and fully supported to meet their individual needs. The quality of assessments is strong. Foster carers are supported well by consistent supervising social workers and a comprehensive training offer. Fostering panels provide high-level scrutiny and effective decision-making to safeguard children.
39. Young children who live in children's homes benefit from the level of specialist support they need to feel secure and make progress. The planning for these children includes the option for support to help them to live with foster families when it is safe and appropriate to do so.
40. The local authority is part of a regional adoption agency (RAA) - Together 4 Children. The recruitment of prospective adopters is appropriately informed and targeted by the specific needs of children. Adoption panel provides an effective quality assurance process that ensures that children are placed with adopters who are able to meet their lifelong needs. Most children with a plan of adoption benefit from detailed and effective transition plans when they move to live with their adopters.
41. A small number of children with a plan of adoption experience delay due to the time taken to complete prospective adopter assessments and in the decision being taken to search for adopters outside of the RAA. IROs have escalated the latter issue but with limited effect. This means that these children do not move to their permanent families soon enough. The recording and ratification of decision-making to change children's plans away from adoption have been strengthened.
42. Social workers carry out excellent creative, respectful and sensitively compiled life-story work for children with a plan of adoption. This includes later-life letters. These will be valuable for children in the future should they wish to explore their early childhood experiences and will support them to understand how key decisions were made about their lives.
43. The vast majority of children in care in Telford and Wrekin receive safe care which meets their needs. A small number of children live in unregistered supported accommodation. Senior leaders complete risk assessments with a rationale for the placement continuing. Social workers increase the frequency of their visits to ensure children's safety while the registration process is carried out.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

44. Care leavers in Telford and Wrekin benefit from timely allocation to their personal advisers (PAs). This enables PAs the opportunity to understand children's stories

and build a relationship with them before they transition into adulthood and leave care services. As a result, many care leavers make positive decisions to maintain their links with the service.

45. A stable workforce in the care leaver service means that many PAs have known care leavers since they were children in care. PAs care about the care leavers they work with and take time to understand them through visits and regularly keeping in touch according to individual needs.
46. PAs are resolute in their efforts to engage vulnerable care leavers. Those care leavers who are parents are supported through regular contact. PAs are persistent in ensuring care leavers' well-being and safety, particularly at times of crisis. Consequently, care leavers who are young parents benefit from strong and trusting relationships.
47. Pathway plans are completed in collaboration with care leavers. Planning for care leavers places a strong emphasis on supporting the ambitions of young people. The pathway plans are comprehensive, written to the care leaver and have a clear thread demonstrating the care leaver offer throughout. Care leavers' views and aspirations are well captured in their plans.
48. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are extremely well supported across the range of their needs and circumstances. They live in settings where their cultural and religious needs are met. This means that unaccompanied care leavers are settled, secure and well prepared for adulthood.
49. Disabled care leavers are well supported by their PAs when they transition to adult services at the age of 18. Effective relationships are built with adult services and providers to support the development of their adult support plan. This means that their needs and rights and entitlements as care leavers are promoted.
50. Care leavers are living in suitable accommodation and receive the right level of support that enables them to live independently. PAs work collaboratively with housing and are proactive in supporting care leavers to secure permanent accommodation. Care leavers are matched effectively to accommodation which meets their cultural needs and interests and they are able to make progress with their independence skills. Care leavers said they felt safe in their homes. PAs maintain regular contact with the very small number of care leavers who are in custody.
51. For those care leavers who live in foster care, there are opportunities to remain in 'staying put' arrangements with their foster carers. This provides them with ongoing security and stability.
52. The care leaving service places a positive emphasis on employment, education and training. The Leavers Lounge is at the centre of care leaver provision, supporting their education beyond statutory school age. PAs are ambitious and

support care leavers in trying to achieve their academic or personal aspirations. As a result, care leavers are able to pursue their goals, for example to go to university, to work in specialist areas and to gain apprenticeships. The financial support offer when care leavers go to university is strong, which means that they can focus on their studies.

53. PAs support care leavers effectively to access mental health services when required. Care leavers are encouraged to seek support for their emotional well-being, with PAs supporting them to attend their appointments when appropriate.
54. Care leavers benefit from an extremely comprehensive and generous local offer. The support offer is open to all care leavers up to the age of 25 and the council has made care leaver a protected characteristic. The offer is published online and is available at the touch of a button in any language required as well as a facility for the offer to be read aloud. The exceptional local offer includes an enhanced setting-up allowance which enables them to stay put with their foster carer until the age of 25; council tax exemption extends to 25 years no matter where care leavers live. These are improvements since the last inspection. This is having a significant impact in ensuring that care leavers have priority across a range of services.
55. Care leavers are celebrated individually through the work of their PAs, the HotShots awards and at the annual celebration events. The representatives of the care leavers council have made a real difference to the delivery of services for children in care and care leavers. Care leavers have impressively initiated the development of the care leaver takeover of the service, been involved in co-production of the local offer and have undertaken mental health training to support them in the new role as peer mentors.

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

56. The strong commitment of the corporate leadership is evident in the political and financial support for children's services in Telford and Wrekin. The impact of the stability of the strategic quartet in the leader of the council, the lead member for children, the chief executive and the director of children's services is impressive as they work together to make sure that children are the priority across the whole council. This has led to considerable investment in children's services, in particular the development of a new social work practice model and the further development of the Strengthening Families teams, who now provide a more comprehensive range of early help services to children and families, resulting in improved experiences for children. This commitment is also reflected in approval by the council of care leaver being a protected characteristic, which is improving opportunities for care leavers.
57. Senior leaders work tirelessly with partners to improve children's experiences. Partnership work with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support

Service (Cafcass) is a strength and the local authority's involvement in the Family Network Pilot is testament to this. Where there are challenges, senior leaders are actively engaged with partners to ensure that there is progress towards developing a coherent and responsive service. This is especially evident in the ongoing strategic work to support health to improve the quality of child and adolescent mental health services and in the effective work with the police that has reduced the demands of police contacts coming into Family Connect. The impressive response to the child exploitation enquiry has made sure that services for children at risk of exploitation in Telford and Wrekin are now coherent and effective.

58. Corporate parenting is a strength in Telford and Wrekin. Senior leaders take their responsibilities for children seriously and have made considerable progress to make sure that children, care leavers and families influence the development of children's services. Children and care leavers are involved at board and project level in developing the local offer and in shaping services. The engagement with children and families who are subject to child in need and child protection planning has been exceptional and had significant impact on service development, including the work of the Dandelion group in improving families' experiences of child protection conferences.

59. Senior leaders are aware of and are implementing recent changes expected of them following newly published government guidance. Some of these, such as the renewed focus on kinship care, already form part of Telford and Wrekin's sufficiency plans. This is already having a positive impact, with more children remaining in kinship care through special guardianship orders.

60. Leaders in Telford and Wrekin are responsive to increasing and new demands and are innovative and ambitious in their responses. This has included the response to increased numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming into care who are now receiving excellent support, both as children in care and as care leavers. The introduction of a new social work model in response to the increasing numbers of children on child protection plans has been exceptionally effective. Consequently, the rate of children on child protection plans has safely halved over the last six months.

61. Senior leaders ensure that children's services continually improve as research-based practice is embedded across the service. The nurturing and development of participatory approaches is a real strength in Telford and Wrekin. This contributes to a culture of effective relational practice for children and families, establishing trusting relationships which support and foster change at an organisational level and in individual practice.

62. Quality assurance systems are well embedded in Telford and Wrekin. Audit activity takes place regularly and social workers value the opportunity to reflect on their practice. Leaders are further developing the richness of audit activity through gaining feedback from families.

63. Staff benefit from a strong learning culture. Social workers have a range of training opportunities available to them, including bite-sized learning, which makes it more accessible. Training opportunities enable social workers to develop new skills which provide them with additional tools to support their work with families as well as supporting their professional development.
64. Social workers are well supported both formally and informally by managers. Supervision takes place regularly and makes sure that children's plans are progressed effectively. Management oversight of work is now consistently evident, with a rationale of decision-making recorded across the services outside of Family Connect.
65. The stability of the experienced workforce creates the perfect environment to benefit children and care leavers. As a result, social workers maintain relationships with children who know them over many years, which contributes to children's feeling of belonging. Staff enjoy working in an environment where senior leaders are visible, and they feel valued.

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