

Inspection of Cumberland local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 7 to 18 October 2024

Lead inspector: Lisa Walsh, His Majesty's Inspector

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

This was the first inspection of Cumberland local authority children's services. Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness unitary authorities came into being on 1 April 2023. Children's services in the predecessor local authority, Cumbria County Council, were judged requires improvement to be good in November 2022.

There has been significant political and corporate investment and a strong commitment to improve services for children and families in Cumberland. Senior leaders have made an accurate self-assessment of their strengths and areas for development. The implementation of a new social work model has supported the development of a culture that places children firmly at the centre of practice. Strong foundations for good social work to flourish have been created through a well-established improvement board that is leading to stronger partnership working and effective oversight and monitoring of frontline practice.

Most children in care and care-experienced young people in Cumberland are being supported to access the right support at the right time. However, some groups of children who need help and protection are not receiving a sufficiently timely and robust response. Firm plans are in place and action is being taken to improve the

experiences of children who are privately fostered, those children aged 16 to 17 presenting as homeless and when children experience neglect.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of the response to children who have experienced neglect.
- The response to children who are privately fostered.
- The support for 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- The timeliness and quality of return home interviews.

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

1. Most children and families benefit from thorough and robust screening at the 'front door' by skilled workers. Decisions to support, including for early help, are timely and appropriate, with children and families receiving the right support at the right time. For some families, the thorough work carried out during screening prevents a need for further support. The interface between early help and statutory social work is mostly understood, with children stepping down from children's social care to early help in line with reduced need.
2. The quality of contacts to the safeguarding hub is mostly strong. Effective systems are in place to ensure that all contacts are screened, prioritised and signposted appropriately, without delay. Social workers in the safeguarding hub recognise the importance of referrals being progressed within timescales, balancing this with the need to obtain enough information to make proportionate and informed recommendations about next steps.
3. When children experience domestic abuse, social workers in the safeguarding hub are effective in considering the impact of the abuse on the child, the family history in the context of previous experiences and their cultural identity. Social workers are tenacious in their approach to working with families, including perpetrators.
4. When children present with risks linked to exploitation, information and expertise are shared by co-located specialist police and child exploitation workers to inform decision-making. Recommendations made by social workers are proportionate to the level of risks and concerns.
5. For some children who have experienced neglect, social workers do not consistently recognise or understand the impact on children in their daily lives. There are sometimes delays in decisive action being taken to address the impact of neglect and not all children receive an appropriate and timely protective response. Child protection plans are not always effective in improving their experiences. Social workers do not always recognise the presenting risks

and, for some children, plans are adult-focused, with an emphasis on support to parents.

6. The emergency duty team is a small, responsive service. Appropriate action is taken to reduce risk to children out of hours, with a comprehensive handover to daytime services.
7. When children are identified as being at risk of significant harm, there is timely transfer from the safeguarding hub to the support and protect teams. For the majority of children, strategy discussions are held promptly. The effective contribution of key partners informs decision-making. Records of decisions are sufficiently detailed, and actions are appropriately focused on children's safety.
8. Section 47 enquiries are timely and for most children they build on the information shared in the strategy meeting. Social workers visit children without delay and gather their views, which supports them to take appropriate and child-focused actions and make appropriate recommendations.
9. For most children, safety plans are put in place to address immediate concerns. For a minority of children, safety plans are overly optimistic and do not include clear actions and work to be undertaken to ensure that risk to children reduces.
10. For children where there are no immediate safeguarding concerns, there is a timely assessment of their needs by social workers in the support and protect service. Children are not subjected to unnecessary statutory processes.
11. For most children, including disabled children, assessments provide an accurate understanding of need and risk, and this leads to effective plans, with actions that focus on improving children's experiences.
12. Most plans are detailed and specific, ensuring professionals and family members are clear about what needs to happen. For a small minority of children, plans do not contain sufficient detail about the presenting concerns and what needs to happen next.
13. Children are visited regularly by their social workers when they are the subject of child in need or child protection plans. Social workers are skilled in building relationships quickly and taking time to understand how children are feeling. For some children, the depth and quality of discussions and direct work are variable and do not consistently provide an understanding of their experiences.
14. Most child protection conferences, core groups and child in need meetings are held regularly and are effective in reviewing progress. Meetings are well attended by professionals and family members, who share important updates to help measure the progress and impact of plans. For a small number of children, escalating concerns are not actively considered and this is also the case when there is a lack of progress being made. This means that some children remain in circumstances where their experiences do not improve quickly enough.

15. Some children are subject to repeated periods of child protection planning. Current plans for these children do not always consider how effective previous plans were. As a result, some children experience repeated cycles of concern and harm.
16. The decisions to end child protection plans are now appropriate. There is a clear recognition of how risks have reduced, with continuing needs being identified, and appropriate ongoing support is provided through child in need planning.
17. When it is recognised that children are not being safeguarded effectively by a child protection plan and concerns are escalating, they are appropriately considered at legal placement panel. Effective help and support put in place during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline result in risk reducing for some children because of the positive progress achieved. The oversight of children in pre-proceedings by senior managers is robust.
18. Children who are identified as living in private fostering arrangements do not always receive a consistently effective response. For some children, the quality of referrals regarding potential private fostering arrangements is poor, lacking basic information such as the start date of the arrangement and parents' details. This is leading to some delay in assessing the suitability of these arrangements. Leaders are aware of these shortfalls in practice and have firm plans in place to address these issues.
19. For children at risk of exploitation, specialist staff from the complex safeguarding team provide targeted impactful interventions. Workers spend time building meaningful relationships with children and undertake creative direct work with them. This is supporting the reduction of risk.
20. When children go missing from home or care, return home interviews are not always timely. Interviews vary in quality, with some not sufficiently exploring the push and pull factors or detailing what follow-up actions are needed to reduce further episodes of going missing to reduce risk to children.
21. The response to 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless is not always appropriate. These children do not consistently receive the guidance or information they require to make informed decisions about their rights and entitlements. This impacts on them receiving the support they need, including their right to become looked after. This increases the risk to these children of being left without a secure base.
22. The local authority designated officer service responds promptly to referrals and provides a thorough response when allegations are made against adults working with children.
23. A commissioned service undertakes the assessment of and support for young carers. Emotional and practical support is provided, and this includes access to

group activities. Leaders have an action plan to further strengthen oversight and review the impact of service delivery for these children.

24. There are robust systems in place for children who are educated at home and those who do not attend school on a full-time basis are known. Staff are successful in identifying the whereabouts of most children who are absent from school for prolonged periods. Effective support is provided to help children settle back into school routines after periods of absence.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

25. Decisions for children to enter care are appropriate and timely, with clearly recorded management rationale. Assessments explore all options, including reunification through the family connections team. Swift action is taken to find the most appropriate homes for children when they are at risk, or when plans determine that this is the right decision.
26. Most children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs. Children are carefully assessed to ensure that homes meet their needs. This includes those in special guardianship arrangements and those 16- and 17-year-olds living in supported accommodation. There are no children living in unregistered children's homes.
27. A small number of young children with plans for long-term fostering are living in children's homes because of a lack of suitable foster placements. Despite this not being the plan for them, children continue to make progress. There is consistent oversight from senior leaders and managers to support these children to move to more suitable homes in line with their individual needs at the earliest opportunity.
28. Children in care are supported to live with kinship carers and to stay within their family and communities whenever possible. Social workers make effective use of family group conferences and family network meetings to identify kinship carers or family members who can offer support, maintaining children's identity with their birth family. There is strong oversight and review of keeping brothers and sisters together where it is appropriate to do so. This promotes children's sense of identity and connection with their family members.
29. The quality of assessments of children in care is variable. In a small number of assessments, social workers are not capturing children's voices explicitly enough to help fully understand children's circumstances and plan for next steps. When assessments are stronger, there is a clear rationale for decisions made. These assessments are focused and used to inform effective and timely care planning for children.
30. Early consideration of permanence, along with parallel planning, prevents delays in progressing permanence plans for most children. Reviews are mostly effective and timely to support the progression of plans. For a small number of children, there is an absence of rigorous challenge from the independent

reviewing officer (IRO). This lack of effective oversight does not consistently ensure that legal permanence is secured at the earliest opportunity. Senior leaders are implementing plans to improve this area of work, including providing additional training to support IRO challenge, relaunching the dispute resolution policy, and increasing IRO oversight of permanence panels.

31. When it is safe and in their best interests, children are supported to return home to the care of their parents. The assessment, planning and arrangements for these children are effective.
32. Most children have established relationships with IROs. Children are encouraged and assisted to attend their review. Their wishes and feelings are well considered and integrated into care plans.
33. For most children, care planning is timely and effective. Social workers have a strong understanding of children's needs and identify appropriate support that improves children's experiences.
34. The quality of written care plans for some children is inconsistent. These plans do not routinely consider contingencies if care arrangements break down. This means that for some children there is a lack of clarity regarding alternative care options should these be required.
35. When children live away from their birth family in the longer term, the parents' views are not consistently reflected in care plans. When care proceedings have concluded and there is a plan away from parental care, parents are not always involved in children's care planning even though they attend reviews.
36. Family time is routinely promoted and prioritised to ensure that children maintain appropriate family links. This helps children to maintain lifelong relationships with people who are important to them.
37. Children's participation is a strength in Cumberland. Children in care groups strongly influence the shaping of services and they have regular and meaningful access to senior managers and politicians. Children feel valued as their voices are listened to. They have been given the opportunity to share their experiences to increase understanding and awareness of what it is like to be a child in care in Cumberland. This has informed the priorities, principles and actions of the corporate parenting board.
38. Social workers know their children well and speak about them with care and compassion. Social workers reflect children's wishes and feelings in their plans. Strong direct work, including life-story work, the use of memory boxes and ongoing discussions with children help them understand their history and identity. Some children have experienced a high number of changes in social worker, which makes it harder to build a trusting relationship. This has an impact on some children forming relationships with social workers.

39. Children living in foster placements are happy and settled and most are making progress. Foster carers have a positive experience of assessment and support and feel that training helps them to better meet the needs of children.
40. Children in care are supported to experience a variety of hobbies and activities that they enjoy and that enrich their lives. Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are well considered and most children in care are supported well in their health and development. The offer of direct work by expert practitioners is having a positive impact on children's experiences.
41. When children experience disruption and instability in their care arrangements, meetings, chaired by an IRO, support careful consideration of future care planning. 'Resilience workers' provide practical and emotional support to carers and children to help stabilise foster homes or help children move to a new carer. This supports children to understand decisions about their care.
42. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive an effective service. Most children live in homes that are a cultural match and meet their identity needs. Social workers have a strong understanding of children's histories and the trauma that they have experienced. Children are supported to access appropriate legal advice to support their asylum claims.
43. The virtual school has established and embedded effective links with schools, other council departments and a wide range of external partners. Some children are making positive progress in education, with additional support accessed through their personal education plans. For those children who do not make adequate progress, senior leaders now have a strengthened focus on monitoring and reviewing their progress at an earlier stage, through the recently launched vulnerable children's education panel.
44. Adoption support services are delivered effectively from the newly formed regional adoption agency (Cumbria Adoption). The recruitment of adopters who can meet the needs of the children remains a challenge. To address this challenge, leaders have commissioned arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency to increase the number of adoptive carers, but it is too soon to assess the impact of this for children.
45. Social workers in the adoption service have a good understanding of children's needs and sensitively manage and support children through the process. Prompt, creative and carefully considered transition plans are developed to ensure that children are enabled to attach and settle with their new family. Once placed, children are making good progress.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

46. Children benefit from the timely allocation of personal advisors (PAs), enabling them to develop trusting relationships before they leave care. Early links with transition workers support planning for children in care who have additional needs before they reach adulthood. Effective working with adult services

ensures that disabled children have their ongoing needs met as they move to receive adult services.

47. Social workers and PAs are persistent in maintaining contact with young people when they leave care. They visit care leavers frequently and the strength of their relationships supports care leavers' progress and their developing independence skills.
48. Pathway plans are detailed and aspirational and reflect care leavers' wishes and feelings. Plans ensure that care leavers have the support they need, while being encouraged to develop their own skills and independence. Plans are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they reflect any changing needs.
49. PAs are strong advocates for care leavers. This ensures that care leavers receive the support they need. Care leavers are supported to develop positive social connections. The recent development of a social group has started to have a positive impact for some care leavers in Cumberland. Care leavers can join impactful groups, such as Chat 2 Change. Care leavers are rightly proud and celebrate the group's achievements to date.
50. Care leavers have a good understanding of their health histories. They are supported to register with a GP and dentist and access the specialist support they may need. A lack of dedicated access to mental health services means some care-experienced young people face delays in having their mental health needs assessed and supported as adults. PA support remains in place, and they continue to provide practical and emotional support for young people's well-being when this is the case.
51. PAs are clear about care leavers' entitlements and ensure that care leavers know and understand them. The local offer, although out of date online, covers basic entitlements such as council tax exemption for those living in Cumberland and financial support for driving lessons. The setting-up home allowance has recently been increased to meet recommended levels. The local offer is under review, involving care leavers, to ensure it meets their changing needs.
52. The majority of care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs. PAs are tenacious in their pursuit of accommodation support for young people who need it. Care leavers who are parents are well supported by their PAs. There is effective liaison between PAs and other professionals, providing timely and appropriate support for care leavers and their children when this is needed.
53. Most care leavers in custody are well supported by their PAs. Pathway plans include current support needs and planning for release, which usually starts at an early stage. For a small minority of care leavers, PAs do not show persistence in pursuing a lack of contact from prison workers. A small number of care leavers miss visits and planning meetings during that time.
54. Most care leavers, including those who were previously unaccompanied children and those who live out of area, receive a high level of practical and emotional

support. Careful consideration is given to ensuring that care leavers can access local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs.

55. PAs support most young people effectively to access education, employment or training. Some care leavers aged 19 to 21 are not being as well supported to find a suitable career that matches their strengths and interests, and as a result are not in education, employment or training. Senior leaders are developing actions to address this issue.
56. Care-experienced young people in Cumberland continue to be supported over the age of 21. Most young people are involved in the decision to continue or end service involvement. This is mostly based on need and personal choice and ongoing support by PAs is flexible to individual need. When and if young people over the age of 21 return to the service to request support, this is responded to appropriately by a duty service or their previously allocated PA.

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

57. In April 2023, Cumberland Council was formed, following local government reorganisation leading to the disaggregation of provision from Cumbria County Council. There continue to be four remaining shared services; these are out-of-hours, fostering, adoption and residential services, along with a shared electronic recording system. There are well-established plans in place for these services to be separated to ensure that provision is focused specifically on the needs of Cumberland children.
58. Senior leaders have responded effectively to local government reorganisation and the newly formed council has firmly established a unique identity. Leaders have swiftly completed a whole-system diagnostic assessment across children's services. These findings have informed a robust and appropriately focused improvement plan and have facilitated a greater level of scrutiny and challenge. There are clear and ambitious service plans for children.
59. There is a well-embedded shared vision across the workforce, and strong partnership arrangements are supporting service improvements. As a result, the experiences and progress of children in care and care-experienced young people are good. Firm and appropriately focused plans are starting to improve consistency in the response to children who need help and protection.
60. Senior leaders are prioritising increasing stability across the workforce. The director for children's services (DCS) has been successful in recruiting permanent assistant directors and service managers. The leadership team is strong and visible. They have developed a supportive and challenging learning culture, leading by example, and embedding a culture for social work practice to flourish. Leaders have established a strong Cumberland identity that staff can be proud of. Staff unanimously report that 'there is a real buzz' about working in Cumberland. They feel energised, valued and listened to.

61. Senior leaders have established strong and effective relationships strategically and operationally with partner agencies and this is leading to a responsive and robust multi-agency response for children and families. Health partners are now co-located at the front door and police capacity has been increased in response to growing demand. The creation of the new family connections team is supporting children to return to their local area.
62. The leader of the council, lead member, chief executive and DCS, alongside senior leaders across the council, have a relentless focus on improving children's experiences. This improvement is being supported by additional significant investment in services for children and families, including the development of the safeguarding hub and restructuring early help. The Family Help and Prevention Strategy, co-developed with Cumberland families, is supporting more accessible services to provide the right support at the right time. Plans are being implemented to improve practitioners' understanding of the impact of neglect on children so that this is consistently recognised and responded to at the earliest stage.
63. Senior leaders', elected members' and partners' commitment to children is strong. Since its relaunch in April 2024, membership of the corporate parenting board has been refreshed and the governance structure has been redesigned. There are now a clear set of priorities focusing on the areas for improvement, which are being used to improve accountability. Direct engagement events and training are ensuring that all staff have a shared understanding about their responsibility as corporate parents.
64. Cared for children are making a positive contribution to service delivery and are participating well. For example, children and young people have been influential in the 'Language That Cares' campaign. This innovative and impactful work has focused on the language that professionals use when working with children and young people through the creation of powerful digital avatars to help bring this to life. This work is embedding across the workforce and is supporting more inclusive and respectful practice.
65. Senior leaders know the service well. Areas for development are well understood and appropriately focused plans are being implemented to support service improvements. The self-evaluation is an accurate reflection of what inspectors found. The children's improvement board, chaired by a Department for Education adviser, is supporting an ethos of high support and high challenge. Leaders welcome external scrutiny, and this is leading to positive developments in practice.
66. Leaders have placed a high priority on supporting children to return closer to home, and where appropriate to live with their families, and have been successful in these endeavours. Leaders are fully aware that sufficiency of placements to meet the needs of children locally remains a challenge and have demonstrated that they are taking effective action to address this.

67. Leaders have a clear line of sight on practice through the development of a comprehensive quality assurance framework. A performance culture is embedding. Effective performance reporting is supporting senior leaders and managers to have a clear understanding of performance. Dashboards and performance clinics are providing managers with the information that they need to monitor and improve experiences for children. Case audit findings and practice observations are being used effectively to support the learning of staff across the service.
68. Supervision is regular, although it is not always sufficiently reflective, and the recording is variable. Social workers told inspectors that supervision is helpful and supports their learning. There has been investment in a bespoke leadership development programme to support managers to further develop their oversight and challenge, the impact of which is embedding.
69. There is a refreshed and appropriately focused recruitment and retention strategy that recognises the challenge of working across an area that is coastal, rural and urban. Creating a stable and experienced workforce is being prioritised and supported through the creation of a social work academy. Newly qualified social workers are supernumerary to the workforce establishment. This allows them to be supported effectively and enables safe learning experiences. Workload allocation is reflective of skills and experience.
70. While the number of agency social workers is high, this group of staff is committed and there is an appropriate focus on agency staff becoming permanent. There is increasing workforce stability, including through employing social workers from overseas and initiatives such as 'grow your own' and the thoughtful relocation of workspaces to make them more accessible.
71. Overall, caseloads for social workers are manageable, with any changes being carefully monitored. There are clear career pathways at all levels of the service, enabling staff to develop their skills. Workers, including agency workers, say that they have access to relevant training to assist them in their work.
72. Social workers consistently report that they feel well supported by managers. Morale is high. Social workers told inspectors that they work in a culture that values them as individuals and supports them in their practice.

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