

Inspection of Shropshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 June to 4 July 2025

Lead inspector: Jenny-ellen Scotland, 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in Shropshire achieve positive outcomes and demonstrate measurable progress due to effective services that comprehensively address their needs and mitigate risks.

Since the last ILACS inspection in February 2022, and particularly since the subsequent focused visit in November 2023, which identified a decline in child protection practice, senior leaders have taken purposeful action to implement a wide range of evidence-based improvements across the service. These improvements are having a discernible and positive impact, enabling vulnerable children, care leavers and families to make and sustain significant change, ultimately improving their lives.

Senior leaders are ambitious, family focused and firmly child centred. Taking a whole-council approach, they have worked closely with political leaders and multi-agency partners, demonstrating unwavering commitment to improving outcomes for children and care leavers.

Leaders have cultivated a culture of ambition and continuous improvement. All areas of service are characterised by many areas of excellence, compassion, and a resolute focus on outcomes. Listening to children, understanding their lived experiences and acting on their views are strongly embedded in practice.

What needs to improve?¹

- Meaningful and sustained participation of children, care leavers and their families in the strategic planning, development and evaluation of services across all areas, including the fostering service. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The response to the emotional well-being and mental health needs of care leavers. (enabler 1, national framework)

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

1. Children benefit from highly effective early help delivered by skilled professionals who identify and respond swiftly to emerging concerns. The establishment of early help multi-agency hubs in areas of greatest need has helped professionals to work more closely together to provide a robust preventative response to vulnerability and risk. As a result, children receive the right support at the right time, preventing harm from escalating and enabling progress. Step-up and step-down arrangements between early help and social care are effective and well coordinated.
2. The daily 'Pitstop' meeting, led by police and attended by key partners, reviews police contacts where there are no specific identified safeguarding concerns. This enables timely information-sharing and decisions about early help, ensuring that families receive support promptly, preventing escalation of need.
3. When children need help and protection, referrals are made to Compass, Shropshire's 'front door' service. The quality and timeliness of partner referrals are consistently high, with parental consent routinely recorded by most professionals. Initial screening within Compass is robust and effective, ensuring that children and families are swiftly directed to the most appropriate service. Experienced senior social work practitioners make confident, timely and proportionate decisions. Parental consent for multi-agency checks is appropriately obtained, and practitioners understand when to override consent to safeguard children. Practitioners make effective use of children's histories to inform their decisions, ensuring timely access for children to the right level of support. Decisions are well documented and supported by strong management oversight.
4. Managers have embedded a culture of professional curiosity and rigorous practice within Compass. This provides a firm foundation for high-quality assessment and targeted intervention. Team managers systematically audit practice to check that children are receiving the right level of support, taking

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

action when they are not, fostering continuous improvement and excellence in service delivery.

5. Social workers in the assessment team recognise and respond quickly and effectively to risk. They see children alone, and their records capture children's wishes and feelings. Workers use a range of tools to engage with children and reach a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Non-resident fathers' views are actively sought to inform assessments.
6. Social workers in the assessment, case management and court teams make good use of research to inform their understanding of the impact of abuse and to help parents understand professional worries for their children. This helps parents to engage in services and make the changes needed for their children. Relationship-based practice shines through children's records.
7. Social workers' assessments are thorough, timely and child centred. They lead to proportionate responses to risk and need. Practitioners engage sensitively with children and families, ensuring assessments accurately reflect the child's lived experience. Strategy meetings and child protection enquiries are comprehensive and include relevant agencies, ensuring a timely response and reduction in risk of harm for children. Children are seen alone when appropriate. Interventions begin promptly, supported by clear management oversight and effective supervision.
8. Child protection conferences are convened appropriately, where a protection plan is formulated to reduce risk and vulnerability for children.
9. Child in need and child protection plans outline clearly what needs to change and the support that children and parents will receive. Plans are focused, time-bound, and aligned to identified risks and needs, ensuring agencies understand what must happen. This helps to improve children's situations in timescales that are relevant to them.
10. Children's plans are reviewed regularly through multi-agency meetings with the professionals who are involved with them and their families. Family engagement and the views of children are reflected throughout, helping to give an accurate picture of the impact of intervention.
11. Information shared at child protection review conferences is thorough and child focused, including detailed analysis and evidence of progress made. Child protection chairs are effective in their challenge and oversight. They are instrumental in progressing children's plans and ensuring escalation when needed. Appropriate use of legal planning meetings takes place if plans are not effective in reducing risk.
12. When risks are not reducing, children are quickly escalated to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters before proceedings are clear and are detailed in articulating social workers' concerns. Comprehensive parenting assessments help determine if parents are successfully able to meet

the needs of their children while receiving multifaceted support. Impact chronologies are integral to assessments and are used well to inform decision-making. An increasing number of children are successfully diverted from proceedings as appropriate.

13. Early help practitioners and social workers use an established tool to manage neglect well and take action when required. This tool is used alongside parents to help them understand where they need to make changes.
14. Children affected by domestic abuse benefit from a strong, coordinated multi-agency response. Social workers understand the impact of domestic abuse on children, and targeted work with parents helps to reduce risk. Where engagement with external services is limited, dedicated family practitioners work intensively with families and offer both group and individual consultancy to support social workers.
15. Swift and effective assessment and planning ensure that risks for unborn children are well understood and managed appropriately. Close partnership work with midwives through birth planning meetings ensures that agencies are working to a coordinated plan to safeguard the child.
16. Family group conferences or family network meetings are routinely considered and used well to consolidate the support network around the child. The early involvement of family members, alongside comprehensive parenting assessments and targeted intervention planning, helps identify the support families need to care safely for their children. This approach is contributing to a reduction in the number of children entering care. When risks escalate, timely and appropriate decisions are made, grounded in thorough, evidence-based assessments.
17. The repurposing of a children's home to provide short-term care and use of the short-breaks provision gives a safe base for children while intensive therapeutic and practical support with parents enables children to successfully return to their family home.
18. Family support workers and the highly effective Stepping Stones service provide practical and therapeutic support to help parents develop safe and appropriate parenting skills. Their work complements that of social workers in achieving positive change. A wide range of support services are available for families, including parenting programmes and interventions for male perpetrators of domestic abuse. These supports are helping families make sustained progress.
19. Disabled children receive highly personalised support from social workers who know them well. Children at risk are visited regularly and seen alone, with nonverbal children supported to communicate through appropriate tools or advocates. Detailed observations inform a dynamic assessment of need, with social workers ensuring that children's voices remain central to planning and decision-making.

20. The initial response to 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless is timely and, for most, appropriate. Workers gather comprehensive information from partner agencies and consider the child's own views. Options for those at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness are thoroughly explored. However, advocacy is not consistently provided at the initial point of presentation.
21. Children living in private fostering arrangements are well supported. Thorough assessments and good management oversight help ensure the suitability of their care arrangements. The fostering service takes a proactive approach to raising awareness through social media, the council website, and by distributing information booklets to all schools in Shropshire.
22. Young carers are identified and visited, although workers' assessments of their needs and their subsequent support plans do not always address their needs well. Groups and activities have been established in some areas; however, provision is inconsistent across the county. Leaders are addressing this through aligning the service with early help.
23. Children at risk of exploitation or who go missing are supported through the TREES exploitation service. Interventions are dynamic and effective, with experienced specialist workers building trusted relationships with children. Comprehensive, targeted plans, underpinned by robust, analytical assessments, help to reduce the risk of harm.
24. Out-of-hour services respond appropriately to calls from professionals, members of the public, families and carers. Experienced practitioners respond effectively to the range of children's needs, supported in their decision-making by accessible senior leaders.
25. The local authority designated officer response to allegations against adults who work with children is highly effective and timely. Experienced and knowledgeable staff ensure continuity of practice. Appropriate action is taken when individuals working with children pose a risk of harm.
26. Effective information-sharing and joint working between relevant teams strengthen the oversight of children who are electively home educated or missing from education. Improved systems and processes enable the earlier identification of vulnerable children, allowing targeted support to improve home arrangements and school attendance.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

27. Children in care in Shropshire receive an outstanding service that significantly improves their life experiences and outcomes. The edge-of-care service, Stepping Stones, works proactively and creatively alongside social workers, parents and extended family members to prevent the need for children to enter or to remain in care wherever possible. Family group conferences and family network meetings are routinely and effectively used early in the child's journey

to identify potential carers and support within family networks, ensuring children remain safely connected to their families.

28. When children come into care, their needs are already thoroughly understood through comprehensive social work assessments. These assessments inform clear and detailed care plans that demonstrate measurable impact. This provides a firm basis for achieving timely permanence, enabling most children to live in stable, long-term homes where they can thrive. Where appropriate, children live with their brothers and sisters, with additional support provided to manage any risk of placement breakdown.
29. Reunification is consistently considered at each stage of care planning. Strong management and leadership oversight ensure that decisions to reunify children with their parents are informed by thorough, robust social work assessments and detailed risk analysis. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) also play a crucial role in ensuring these decisions are only made when in the child's best interests. Intensive intervention and support for parents and children before, during and after the child's return home help to promote the sustainability of these arrangements. When reunification is confirmed to be successful, workers make timely applications to revoke the care order.
30. Children are continually encouraged and supported to see their family and friends, which helps them to retain a sense of belonging. Parents are well supported to manage this family time in a way that meets their child's needs.
31. Children in care have stable, trusting relationships with their social workers, who know them well and understand their individual needs. Social workers invest time in building significant, long-lasting connections with children, carrying out direct, personalised work using a range of tools tailored to each child. These strong relationships help children to feel safe, ask questions and explore their early life experiences. Social workers respond with empathy, sensitivity and language that makes children feel valued, understood and genuinely cared for.
32. Effective children in care reviews help workers evaluate children's progress and identify next steps. A very high proportion of children attend their reviews and are well supported to express their views and influence their plans. Reviews are held within required timescales and maintain a consistent child-centred focus. IROs build relationships with children and craft review minutes in a way that thoughtfully reflects each child's voice, helping them to feel seen and heard. The IRO footprint is clearly evident in children's records, including regular visits to children between reviews, ensuring that children's views continue to inform and shape their care plans.
33. Skilled, nurturing workers engage children in impactful life-story work, helping them understand their experiences and the reasons they are in care. This work is carried out with considerable care and sensitivity, resulting in detailed life-

story records that help children make sense of their journey and provide an important resource for the future.

34. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive effective support; workers demonstrate a good understanding of children's rights and support them in navigating the legal processes related to their immigration status. Care plans are comprehensive and tailored to each child's individual circumstances. Wherever possible, consistent interpreters are provided for children.
35. The response when children go missing from care is highly effective in reducing risk and repeat episodes. Return home interviews (RHIs) thoroughly explore each incident, identifying key factors to inform assessments and analysis. Workers discuss findings in supervision to guide their decision-making and safety planning. RHIs also assess placement suitability and consider alternatives when needed, ensuring that care plans reflect the child's views.
36. Disabled children in care benefit from workers who understand their complex health needs. Practitioners skilfully coordinate input from multiple professionals to ensure both children and their carers receive effective support. Strong partnership working enables children's needs to be met promptly and appropriately.
37. Children's health needs are comprehensively assessed, well understood and met. Emotional health support for children is readily available and wraparound support from children's mental health services helps children and their carers to manage any difficulties, such as self-harm. Effective multi-agency meetings coordinate health support.
38. Workers and carers actively support children to get involved in a wide range of activities that reflect their individual interests and promote their well-being. For children who are returning to live with their parents, there is a clear commitment to ensuring that this continues seamlessly after they return home. Additionally, children are encouraged and supported to attend residential activity holidays, where they participate in sports and recreational experiences that contribute to their development and enjoyment.
39. The Children in Care Council, facilitated by the virtual school, plays a central role in shaping services that affect children. Their contributions include developing a guide for social workers on respectful and child-centred communication, for example, referring to 'child in care reviews' as 'child in care meetings'. They are actively involved in recruitment, participating in interviews for key roles, and redesigning the virtual school website to ensure it is accessible and relevant. Children's achievements are consistently recognised through an annual awards ceremony and personalised letters, cards and certificates throughout the year.
40. The virtual school provides high-quality support that promotes children's educational attainment and progress. Children in care make good progress from

their starting points. Workers' tenacity in ensuring children have access to suitable educational provision is notable. Schools value the support the virtual school provides. Workers closely track and monitor the attendance of pupils. Primary attendance is positive; however, leaders rightly recognise that more needs to be done to improve attendance for older pupils.

41. Unregistered children's homes are used for very few children and only when other options have been exhausted. A very small number of children with complex health needs are placed in two settings that provide the required medical care. There is strong consistent oversight and monitoring of these arrangements.
42. Foster carers feel well supported and valued by a responsive and ambitious leadership team. Better recruitment and retention are increasing capacity, and carers speak positively about the respect shown for their role. However, there are some inconsistencies in accessibility to training, the quality of recording, and embedding children's voices in foster carer recruitment, assessment and review.
43. Adoption services are provided through the local authority's arrangements with the regional adoption agency (RAA), Together4Children. The relationship between the local authority and the RAA is strong. Leaders and managers have a clear vision for the service and have invested in the recruitment and retention of adopters. Adopters are well supported through the assessment process and the placement of a child.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

44. Care leavers report feeling safe and secure in their living arrangements, including those placed outside Shropshire. They highlight unwavering support from their personal advisers (PAs), valuing deeply the enduring, trusting relationships they have developed with them over several years, and describing their PAs as reliable sources of guidance, assistance and reassurance. This robust support network significantly reduces their anxieties and fosters their confidence and independence.
45. While they are new initiatives whose impact is yet to be seen, the recent recruitment of a care leaver ambassador and the opening of a new central hub for care leavers reflect a clear commitment to enhancing participation and inclusion.
46. Care leavers are carefully and thoughtfully matched with PAs best suited to engage with and support them. This matching occurs in time to ensure a smooth transition to adulthood, marking the start of a supportive relationship to ensure that young people's needs are met.
47. Care leavers receive regular, purposeful visits from their PAs, often in their homes, to assess the suitability, safety and appropriateness of their

accommodation. This consistent contact helps to build strong, trusting relationships.

48. The current pathway plan format was developed by care leavers in response to feedback from the previous inspection. The result is a clear, accessible document with a summary section outlining actions for both the PA and the young person. Plans are generally of good quality, completed in partnership with young people, and reflect their views well. Most are aspirational and empowering, supporting young people to achieve their goals. Management oversight is evident, with managers often including personal messages of encouragement to the young person.
49. The local offer meets the needs of care leavers. They understand their entitlements and know how to access them. Some support, such as driving lessons, is provided based on individual need. The local authority holds engagement events, including an annual barbecue, which care leavers have requested be held more frequently.
50. The local authority funds an app that offers a range of online resources to support young people's mental health. When care leavers experience mental health challenges, PAs support them to access their GP, who can make referrals to universal services. There are no specific face to face support services accessible to care leavers to help provide immediate emotional health support.
51. Care leavers are supported to access their records, with clear communication to manage expectations around the redaction of sensitive third-party information. Ongoing life-story work is provided to help them make sense of their experiences and understand their journey into and through care.
52. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by an experienced PA with expertise in immigration, alongside a dedicated support worker who is themselves a former unaccompanied asylum-seeking child and care leaver from Shropshire. Both bring valuable insight and empathy to their roles, recognising the need to build trust with young people who may initially be hesitant to engage with professionals perceived as government representatives.
53. Support for care leavers who are parents is delivered with compassion and understanding, focusing not only on the needs of their child but also on helping the young person to recognise and address their own needs.
54. When a care leaver is in custody, PAs maintain regular communication and work closely with probation, prison and housing colleagues to plan ahead and support rehabilitation arrangements. PAs also ensure that young people receive their entitlements while in custody.
55. Care leavers live in suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Joint working with housing services helps to ensure appropriate and well-matched

housing provision. The homeless support worker brings extensive knowledge of housing legislation and availability across Shropshire.

56. Care leavers' independence skills and readiness for adulthood are considered within pathway plans. The local authority provides financial support for private rentals when required. Care leavers benefit from a range of housing options, including trainer flats, temporary accommodation and commissioned supported housing. Young people spoke positively about their housing experiences.
57. Care leavers living outside Shropshire continue to receive consistent support from their PAs, who maintain regular contact and actively help them secure and sustain appropriate accommodation. PAs ensure care leavers receive their entitlements and provide practical assistance, including support with registering with local GPs and accessing emotional health services in their area.
58. When care leavers travel abroad, many do so without support to consider potential risks or develop contingency plans in case they encounter difficulties.
59. Care leavers are supported to find and sustain employment, pursue their future goals and attend university. They are also assisted in accessing apprenticeships and work opportunities. The support provided by the virtual school is having a positive impact. Overall, young people are achieving well academically and benefit from tailored support to meet their individual needs. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are encouraged to pursue diverse career paths and vocational training. Senior leaders recognise the barriers faced by some former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in accessing education and training and are actively working to address these challenges.
60. Care leavers aged 21 and over who are allocated a PA receive tailored support based on assessed needs, continuing up to age 25. Some also receive support beyond 25.
61. For care leavers no longer allocated a PA, in-touch arrangements are variable. This inspection identified that annual contact with care leavers closed to the service, as required by statutory guidance, had not been in place. Senior leaders have responded swiftly to address this shortfall. A data collection exercise is under way to identify and track this cohort, and a new process has been introduced to improve contact. This includes plans for care leavers who are not receiving an active service to receive a birthday card and newsletter outlining updates to the local offer, along with a voucher.
62. Many older care leavers who are no longer in regular contact with the service reconnect with their PAs when they require support. This demonstrates the enduring relationships PAs build with care leavers. Additionally, those who have more recently ended their involvement receive a detailed assessment and analysis of need that informs the collaborative decision to conclude support.

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

63. Children's social care is led by a highly experienced and credible director of children's services (DCS), whose leadership is both visible and influential. Working closely with the senior leadership team, she has established a strong and ambitious culture where children are consistently regarded as 'our children' and supported to feel genuinely loved and cared for. This child-centred ethos is embedded across the workforce and strongly reflected in the commitment of the wider multi-agency partnership.
64. Following the focused visit in November 2023, senior leaders responded transparently and proactively engaged external supports, facilitating rapid improvements with positive outcomes for children and families. Identified areas for improvements have been addressed effectively. Family group conferencing delays are resolved, and multi-agency responses to domestic abuse are well coordinated. Strategy meetings and child protection conferences take place promptly with rigorous IRO oversight. Children's plans are clear and relevant and include meaningful family input. Pre-proceedings are timely, and letter quality has improved. Local placements and emotional health services for children in care are well managed and accessible. Management oversight is robust, supported by thorough supervision records and clear senior leadership decisions. A comprehensive quality assurance framework drives ongoing practice improvements. Staffing and leadership capacity are strengthened through effective recruitment and retention.
65. Corporate leadership is strong, demonstrated by the council's political and financial support of children's services. With children's services at the heart of the council, the chief executive and DCS have prioritised early help and prevention, securing significant investment that improves children's lives.
66. Elective members are well informed about the priorities and challenges facing children's services and have expressed a continued commitment to improving outcomes for children and care leavers.
67. The improvement board, recently rebranded the Children's Ambitions Board, chaired by the chief executive, ensures robust oversight, drives improvement and fosters cross-party collaboration. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen the participation of children and care leavers in these strategic forums.
68. Corporate parenting is underpinned by strong leadership and a clear, values-led vision. Senior leaders actively champion their responsibilities, working with partners to promote a shared ambition to be the best possible parents for children in care and care leavers. Children and young people report that workers and their managers are genuinely proud of them and their achievements.

69. The Corporate Parenting Board, co-chaired by the lead member and a care-experienced young person, has delivered improvements in health assessments, emotional and mental health support, and the role of IROs. Care leavers are granted protected characteristic status, giving them priority access to housing and employment opportunities within the council.
70. Leaders and managers prioritise embedding the child's voice. The introduction of an AI tool reduces administrative workload, allowing practitioners to spend more time with children and families and improve the quality of written records. Direct work is well developed, ensuring children's views inform assessment, planning and decision-making. However, while the child's voice is very well established at an individual level, involvement in the strategic planning, development and evaluation of services, while evident, needs strengthening.
71. Leaders demonstrate detailed knowledge of local communities and use this insight to target support effectively, including for rural areas with pockets of deprivation. This has led to tailored services through locality hubs that reach those most in need.
72. A rigorous, strengths-based quality assurance framework underpins the delivery of high-quality services. Regular, comprehensive audit activity supports improvement and demonstrates steady progress in both quality and compliance. This approach supports learning and is driving improvements in practice and outcomes for children and families.
73. The introduction of information management tools has strengthened leaders' ability to identify and respond to emerging trends through effective data analysis.
74. Research-based practice is firmly embedded. Leaders promote a 'do with, not to' relational approach, fostering a culture of effective relational practice where trust and meaningful relationships with children and families are central, resulting in transformative change.
75. Shropshire is an ambitious learning organisation where staff are supported at all levels to develop their knowledge and skills. Comprehensive programmes, such as the Social Work Apprenticeship and assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), equip practitioners with the skills needed for successful careers and help reduce attrition rates.
76. Managers provide consistent, supportive and reflective supervision, ensuring effective progression of children's plans, with clear management oversight and documented decision-making.
77. Workforce stability benefits children and care leavers by maintaining long-term relationships with workers who know them well. Staff enjoy working for Shropshire, feeling valued and supported by visible senior leadership.

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