Appendix 1

Inspection of Herefordshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 10 to 21 November 2025

Lead inspector: Rebecca Dubbins, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of children care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Herefordshire have significantly improved since the last inspection in 2022, when overall effectiveness was inadequate. Leaders have worked diligently, using effective partnerships to influence and improve the quality and consistency of practice. Recruitment and retention initiatives have successfully stabilised the workforce and reduced high caseloads. As a result, leaders have ensured that children and their families benefit from effective services that make a difference to their lives.

A comprehensive quality assurance framework, used effectively to measure the progress and impact of change, has enabled leaders to have an accurate understanding of the quality and impact of services delivered to children and families. An integral component of this framework is the feedback from children and families, which is responded to well. Leaders have firmly established a culture within the organisation to ensure that children are at the centre of service delivery and that the views of children and their families inform the further development of services.

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What needs to improve?[1]

- The management oversight of the local authority designated officer (LADO). (outcome 3, national framework)
- The identification and assessment of children living in private fostering arrangements. (outcome 3, national framework)

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

1. Children and families benefit from effective early help services. Well-written assessments provide an accurate picture of families' needs, with their views integral and considered well. Workers empower parents to understand their options and to access services that make a difference. Families benefit from a multi-agency network of professionals with whom they meet regularly to ensure that the support continues to be of value. When concerns increase for children, appropriate action is taken to step up to statutory services.

2. When professionals are concerned about children, they appropriately refer into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Workers and managers in the MASH apply thresholds effectively. They consult with their partners in a timely way to ensure that appropriate information is shared, which is used well to consider next steps. Workers demonstrate an appropriate understanding of risk. As a result, children and families receive a timely and proportionate response to concerns.

3. The response to children in emergency situations out of hours is effective. Children are visited when required, and workers take their time to explain concerns and understand the views of children and their families. There is good connectivity with daytime staff to ensure a joined-up response, which allows for children and families' needs to be met whatever the time of day.

4. When children are considered to be at risk, child protection strategy discussions take place swiftly and are effective. These discussions are well attended by professionals who share relevant information about their involvement with the family. As a result, risks posed to children are identified, with an appropriate and proportionate plan made as to how the risk can be mitigated, including the decision to undertake child protection enquiries. Social workers visit children promptly after the strategy discussion, and child protection enquiries are informed by a thorough understanding of children's circumstances, which determine next steps.

[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.

5. Children and family assessments are timely, comprehensive and consider relevant historical information. Assessments are informed by the views of children and their families and include information from professionals. Social workers are inquisitive and demonstrate an understanding of the strengths in families, balancing this against children's presenting risks and needs. For children who are disabled, their complex needs and additional vulnerabilities are understood and responded to well. Social workers analyse this information effectively and provide a plan for intervention that is aimed at reducing risks and making a positive difference to children and families. This includes the provision of short breaks for families with disabled children when this is required.

6. When children are considered to be at risk of significant harm, child protection conferences are convened promptly and are effective. Child protection conference chairs manage these meetings well and enable a purposeful discussion, with children via advocates, parents and multi-agency professionals contributing their views. These meetings result in a clear plan aimed at reducing risks posed to children.

7. Core groups, review child protection conferences and child-in-need planning meetings are held regularly and are well attended. This provides an opportunity for up-to-date information-sharing about children and their families across relevant agencies and enables the progress of children's plans. Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are held when required to strengthen children and families' support networks. Those family members providing support are not always involved in key meetings, which limits the contribution they could make. Leaders acknowledged this and have plans to strengthen this area.

8. Most child protection and child-in-need plans identify clear actions and the support needed for children and their families. For a small number of children who have experienced neglect, the written plans do not always address the impact of cumulative harm and do not start from the lived experience of the child, resulting in plans that are adult focused. There is a renewed practice focus on children living in neglectful households, with recent interventions evidencing a positive impact on children's lives. However, for a small number of children, changes of social worker and the lack of timebound actions with explicit contingency plans mean that children and families are not always aware of what will happen and by when, in the event that children's circumstances do not improve.

9. When children's circumstances do not change and risks escalate, the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline process is strong. This provides effective oversight to ensure that families get the support they need to divert from family court proceedings and for children to remain living with their families. When it is necessary to initiate care proceedings, matters proceed swiftly to enable the necessary legal interventions required to improve children's lives.

10. Children are seen regularly by their social workers and family support workers, who are creative in how they obtain their thoughts and feelings. Children's views and wishes are evidenced throughout their written records, and workers respond to these views with care and sensitivity. As a result of this approach, children and their families are able to develop positive relationships with their workers.

11. When children aged 16 to 17 present as homeless, they receive an appropriate response, with a joint assessment undertaken with colleagues from housing services. Children are made aware of their rights, including their rights to be accommodated. They are offered an advocate and receive support to maximise their chances of remaining within their families.

12. While allegations against professionals who work with children are managed in a timely way with appropriate outcomes, there are inconsistences in the quality of written records, which do not consistently reflect the discussions that take place or the support available and provided. Data is also limited and reliant on manual tracking. This means the service has been unable to complete a comprehensive overview of patterns, trends and outcomes of this work. Leaders have recognised this and have taken action to address this shortfall.

13. Children who take on a caring role are not always clearly recognised by statutory services, and this can mean that their needs are not sufficiently understood. Leaders were aware of this and already had arrangements in place to address this. There is a better response from early help professionals where children are supported to access services that make a difference to their lives.

14. There are very few children identified as living in a private fostering arrangement. Current arrangements to identify, assess and support children living in such arrangements are not effective. Leaders have undertaken some work to raise awareness among their own staff and with their partners. However, it is too early to see the impact of this.

15. Children who frequently go missing from home and who are at risk of exploitation receive an established and impactful response from the GETSAFE team. There are strong relationships with voluntary, statutory partners and community networks, who share intelligence and an understanding of risk and plan a joint response effectively. Risks to children reduce as a result of this work.

16. The oversight of children who are electively home educated is well organised and effective. Officers understand their roles and are proactive in engaging with families before the decision is made to educate children at home. Children's circumstances are understood well, and partners collaborate to ensure that children's safety and general welfare are considered and prioritised.

17. When children are missing education, they are monitored and supported using effective systems. This work means that children of statutory school age typically access or return to education within a short period of time.

18. The edge of care service, known as ECHO, prevents many children from entering care effectively. Skilled practitioners provide tailored interventions to support children to remain within their family networks when it is safe to do so, reducing a reliance on statutory interventions and the need for ongoing social work involvement.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

19. Children enter care at the right time and when it is in their best interests. Children's families and wider networks are considered using FGCs. Children's voices are at the heart of these decision-making forums, conveyed through high-quality, tailored and individualised direct work. Appropriate consideration is given to the bespoke circumstances and needs of family members who look after children under a kinship care arrangement. Assessments are thorough and suitably adaptable to address the children's needs. This ensures that children can remain within their family if this is in their best interests.

20. If it is not possible for children to remain living with their families, children live in homes that meet their needs. Most children are placed locally with foster carers. If children are placed outside of Herefordshire, for example in an emergency, they continue to receive the same service from their workers who will identify a local placement that will better meet the children's needs.

21. Careful consideration is given to understanding the relationships between brothers and sisters. Family time is fully considered, balancing risks and potential benefits for each child. Social workers undertake well-considered assessments to ensure the decisions are in children's best interests.

22. Children who return to the care of their parents do so as a result of thorough assessment and planning processes, which have strong management oversight to ensure that potential risks are managed and children get the care they need.

23. Children in care benefit from positive relationships with their social workers, who visit them regularly. Children told inspectors they are well supported by their current workers. However, some have experienced too many changes in social worker, which has impacted on their ability to trust and talk openly. There has been more consistency recently, and changes have been managed well. Social workers ensure that children understand why they are in care, and they take the time to understand children's individual and diverse experiences and needs. Advocates are routinely offered to children to promote their views and wishes, and many children take up this offer. As a result, children's views were clearly evidenced and their workers responded to these well.

24. Children-in-care reviews are held regularly and are strengthened further by thorough mid-way reviews where the independent reviewing officers (IROs) oversee the progression of the care plan effectively. Children are offered the choice of whether they want to attend and/or chair their meetings. Their views are respected about who they want to attend, and IROs manage this well, meeting with parents, separately if needed, to obtain their views. The outcomes of reviews are consistently well written, directly to children, providing them with an understanding about their care plan.

25. The virtual school has robust systems and procedures in place to provide effective oversight of the education of children in care. This work is having a positive impact on the educational experiences and the progress of most children, with them making good progress from their starting points. A minority of children do not attend school regularly enough, which limits their achievement. Leaders are addressing these barriers, but there is more to do to ensure that all children engage with learning opportunities. Children in care are well supported to enjoy an array of hobbies and activities outside of school, which provides an opportunity for them to develop their skills and talents.

26. Children's health needs are regularly assessed and met. Children benefit from a wide range of services to meet their emotional well-being and physical needs. Children's complex health needs are well understood, and individualised support is provided to meet the children's changing needs. An in-house psychologist provides additional support to social workers to assist care planning. As a result, children benefit from well-considered healthcare plans.

27. Children, including those in residential care, live in appropriate homes that meet their assessed needs. Every effort is made to place children in a registered setting and, as a result, the use of unregistered children's homes is rare. On the very small number of occasions where it has not been possible to place children in a registered provision, senior managers and staff understand the processes needed to ensure that actions are taken to mitigate the risks to the child. Alternative placements are identified without avoidable delay, which has meant children have moved into registered provision swiftly.

28. Children in care who are at risk of exploitation or who go missing receive a swift and positive response from workers in the GETSAFE team, who take the time to understand possible contributing factors. These workers join the multi-agency team around the child to manage and reduce risks to children effectively.

29. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by their workers to make good progress. Children's individual needs are considered well, and they are placed in homes with these needs in mind.

30. Leaders set expectations that children should achieve permanence in a timely way and have systems in place to ensure this. Special guardianship orders (SGOs) are made when it is in children's best interests, and carers and families are well supported and included in planning for these. However, there has been some confusion in the SGO financial offer and how long this support is provided for, which has dissuaded some carers from pursuing this. This has impacted on potential permanence for children. Leaders are aware of this and are taking action to ensure that carers are informed and that workers can explain the full extent of the offer to carers.

31. Foster carers, including kinship carers, are supported well with improved training opportunities. However, the unique needs of kinship carers are not accommodated in this generalised training.

32. Adoption practice is strong. As a result of collaborative working practices with the regional adoption agency (Adoption Central England), children, families and prospective adopters are prepared well and receive appropriate support both before and after the making of an adoption order. Children are placed for adoption in a timely way, with direct contact with their birth family in place for a small number of children, enabling them to achieve permanence but retain connections to their birth family.

33. Support is in place for older children as they reach adulthood and transition to the leaving care team. Children are well supported to understand their entitlements and make plans for their future.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

34. Care leavers in Herefordshire receive a strong service from their personal advisers (PAs), who are allocated in a timely way for children. This enables children to develop relationships with their PAs, who help them understand their options and entitlements before they leave care.

35. PAs demonstrate curiosity and commitment to understanding young people's experiences, concerns and aspirations. They are sensitive to the complexities of family relationships and provide proactive support while appropriately promoting independence. Care leavers benefit from regular communication and visits from their workers, which are purposeful and tailored to their individual needs. PAs take pride in the achievements of care leavers and consistently convey warmth and compassion in their work. Many care leavers view their PAs as dependable and responsive, particularly during times of stress. While some care leavers have experienced changes in workers, they speak highly of their current PAs.

36. Care leavers participate in their pathway reviews, and pathway plans reflect care leavers' wishes and aspirations. Written plans are clear, with achievable actions, and include meaningful support to help young people reach their

goals. PAs use creative engagement strategies for those young people who are reluctant to participate, ensuring support is offered when needed.

37. The health needs of care leavers are understood by their PAs, who support care leavers to be healthy and work effectively with professionals to secure timely support, including mental health interventions when this is required.

38. The local authority's offer for care leavers is clear and comprehensive and is equitable for those living out of area, with a specific focus on care leavers with additional needs. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors were aware of their entitlements, and this is evidenced throughout their written records.

39. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children continue to receive tailored support into adulthood that recognises their unique needs. Their immigration status is addressed early to help to reduce stress and uncertainty about the future. Many care leavers from abroad are placed out of area, which offers benefits such as access to diverse communities but also creates some challenges regarding housing availability and living a distance from their PA. The limited English for speakers of other languages provision in Herefordshire is a challenge, which means that those care leavers who choose to return to the area, must travel to access these courses. Leaders are encouraging growth in college-based classes, and new courses are planned for January 2026.

40. The number of care leavers in custody is positively low. These care leavers benefit from regular visits from their PAs. They build trusted relationships, which enables them to discuss their experiences, future and the support they need. Support for prison discharge is considered early, even when the planned date for discharge is beyond the age of 25.

41. Care leavers who are parents receive support to access universal services. Their PAs help them to understand safeguarding concerns so that there are no unwanted surprises, and the PAs work collaboratively with their child's social worker when there are concerns. As a result, care leavers receive a network of support to be the best parents they can be.

42. Vulnerable care leavers at risk of exploitation are supported by their PA and benefit from the involvement of a worker from the GETSAFE team, who use their expertise and work well with the care leavers' network to reduce risks.

43. Care leavers who are disabled receive support from workers from the 'Young Adults' team, who work with care leavers' PAs. For a few of these care leavers, the decision and plan for where they will live are not always in place well before their 18th birthday. This does not provide the certainty care leavers need to be assured about where they will be living. Leaders are aware of this and are working with colleagues to address this.

44. Care leavers are supported by persistent and creative PAs to access training and employment opportunities in line with their needs. Written records reflect

the attempts made by PAs to encourage and consistently guide care leavers in their chosen field of study or work. This is regularly revisited, and support is offered through various means, including work coaches. As a result, there are more care leavers accessing education, employment and training. However, leaders are committed to further increasing these numbers.

45. Care leavers live in accommodation that is of a suitable standard in areas where they feel safe. This is reflected in written records and expressed by care leavers themselves. 'Staying put' and 'staying close' arrangements enable increasing numbers of care leavers to remain with their foster carers and move at a time more suitable for them. There is effective oversight by leaders to ensure that care leavers' accommodation needs are met to prevent delays for young people moving into new accommodation. Start-up grants and support with independent living skills help care leavers set up and maintain safe, good-quality homes.

46. The support available to care leavers after the age of 21 remains in place unless they opt out, with their needs and wishes determining their ongoing support. As a result, many young people continue to be supported by their PA. For those who do not need or desire this, a named PA maintains a level of contact to ensure that care leavers know how to request support when they need help or advice. When care leavers do contact the service, they get a friendly and caring response.

47. Care leavers have opportunities to contribute to service development. Those who spoke to inspectors told us that they feel their voices and contributions are heard and they have influenced action taken.

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

48. A visible and effective leadership team, supported by corporate and political leaders, has enabled vast improvements in the services delivered to children and their families. Since the appointment of the Corporate Director of Children's Services in July 2024, who is aspirational for children and committed to enhancing their lives, improvements have been made at pace.

49. A permanent and stable management team has driven the changes needed, cultivating a positive environment. Senior leaders have nurtured and coached their teams to deliver improvements and good practice, leading by example. A concise and coherent improvement plan has been embraced by leaders at all levels and owned by frontline staff, who understand their role in the changes needed. The expectations of senior leaders are communicated well, driving practice improvements. The improvement board is well attended, demonstrating the commitment of senior leaders and partners to improve services.

50. The chief executive, leader of the council and lead member are fully engaged in the improvement plan, providing necessary support and challenge when needed. Children's services are rightly considered to be a high priority for the council. Leaders have ensured that the voice of children across Herefordshire informs all the council's strategies, so they appreciate the impact for children of local developments. As a result, leaders understand the needs of children in Herefordshire and have an accurate assessment of how well services are meeting their needs.

51. Leaders are effective corporate parents and understand what children in care and care leavers need. Their ambitious and child-focused approach has ensured that children's voices are sought and heard. There are numerous examples of how children have shared their experiences, via the youth voice group or from surveys undertaken, and children are included in service redesign. As a result, leaders, partners and frontline staff understand what it is like to be a child in care. Surveys are very well responded to with mostly positive feedback. Leaders respond to ensure that issues raised by children are addressed swiftly, evidencing the leadership team's oversight and commitment to get it right for children. Children's achievements are celebrated by their corporate parents.

52. Leaders have improved the offer for care leavers, which provides a wide range of support, such as council tax exemptions, driving lessons, gym membership and funding to set up their first home. This ensures that children who leave care are not disadvantaged, whether they live in Herefordshire or are out of area.

53. Strategic partnerships are now mature, with a shared vision to improve children's outcomes. A jointly owned quality assurance process enables partners to work together to address key themes with positive impact. The effectiveness of strategic partnerships has been reflected operationally in the multi-agency teams in the MASH and in how partners work together to meet children's needs. Governance arrangements have improved. As a result, the partnership has an accurate understanding of the needs of children in Herefordshire, with joint commissioning arrangements established to meet these needs.

54. Leaders have a clear plan in place to manage changes needed as a result of the social care reforms. The plan has been well considered, with the foundations in place as a result of the move to a locality model, and governance arrangements established to oversee ongoing developments. The strength of partnerships provides confidence that these changes can be delivered effectively.

55. Senior leaders understand their sufficiency issues well, and the strategy is informed by the needs of Herefordshire children. Leaders have secured financial investment to create more accommodation options for children in care and care leavers, which includes ongoing commissioning to increase the

range of children's homes available. More foster carers have been recruited and retained, which, comparable to national trends, is impressive. This has meant that most children are placed locally and with foster carers.

56. Planning includes the input of children, young people and their families to ensure that services are co-produced. Parents in Herefordshire have previously been vocal in challenging poor practice. Leaders have taken the time to understand this by commissioning an external review and have acknowledged when services were not good enough. Learning from this, leaders have taken proactive steps by establishing a group of parent representatives, 'Families Making a Difference'. The parents in this group have worked alongside children's services to provide their views and experiences and have engaged in co-production, informing service changes going forwards. Systems have been established to gain feedback at the point of closure, and an impressive number of families have provided positive feedback about services. This shows the commitment leaders have to understanding how their services are making a difference. This is used effectively to learn and improve services, delivering tangible and positive impact for children.

57. The local authority quality assurance framework is comprehensive, robust and allows leaders to have a line of sight into the quality of practice and children's experiences. This is informed by feedback from children and their families from a variety of sources and performance information. An improved use of data and performance information has increased senior leaders' understanding. Leaders use data to continually test and probe services, giving an accurate picture and providing assurance.

58. As a result of this effective quality assurance programme, leaders are aware of the strengths in their services and the areas for further development. While the effectiveness of the LADO role and the oversight of children living in private fostering arrangements needs to improve, leaders had already put arrangements in place to address this.

59. Management oversight from managers at all tiers is reflected in children's records, demonstrating an evidence-based rationale for further action. Supervision records show explorative and reflective discussions and a thorough understanding of children's circumstances, which positively impact on care planning. There is an admirable consistency of high-quality supervision across all service areas, which reflects the training and development leaders continue to provide to managers.

60. Having a stable workforce has and continues to be a priority for senior leaders. At the time of the last inspection, high numbers of agency staff were needed to fill social work vacancies. These numbers have reduced significantly as leaders have invested in 'grow your own' routes into social work and successfully used media campaigns to recruit social workers to Herefordshire. Positive changes in culture and inclusive practice have also enabled staff retention, resulting in more permanent social workers and a reduction in the

turnover of staff. While inspectors saw the negative impact for some children who had experienced changes of workers, this was largely being mitigated well through sensitive engagement by their new workers. In recent months, increased consistency has made a positive difference for children.

61. Leaders have managed change exceptionally well, which has included a move to locality services. Changes are communicated effectively to frontline staff via staff conferences and team and service meetings. The workforce has responded positively to this, with many practitioners able to talk about improvements and the difference these have made for them as workers. They recognise these improvements in their reduced caseloads and the resources now available for the children and families they work with, providing additionality to their work.

62. Frontline staff benefit from regular training, and managers have benefited from a tailored leadership programme. Newly qualified workers benefit from a very structured programme, supported by the academy, to ensure that they can develop at a pace that is right for them. Workers spoken to stated they enjoyed working for Herefordshire. They reported that they felt supported, equipped and safe to do their work, with their managers creating a positive environment for them. The workforce understands and shares the aspirations of leaders to hear the voice of children and their families and to do the very best for children. Inspectors saw this consistently reflected in children's records across all service areas.

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