

Suffolk County Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 September 2017

Lead inspector: Nigel Parkes

Judgement¹	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	Good
The experiences and progress of children looked after and care leavers, and achieving permanence	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Senior leaders share a common commitment to continuous improvement. Governance arrangements are robust. Partnership working is good. Senior managers are astute, determined and clearly focused on children and young people. They understand the importance of getting the basics right but are not afraid to innovate. Among their successes are the strength of the early help offer, the successful implementation and continuing development of the multi-agency safeguarding hub and the roll-out of the local authority's preferred social work model². The combination of strong leadership and effective management oversight underpins an improvement in the quality of assessments and the consistency with which thresholds are applied. Working closely with other agencies, the local authority has strengthened its response to missing children and child sexual exploitation.

The local authority has acted on the recommendations from the last inspection and services for children have improved as a consequence, particularly for children needing help or protection. Support for care leavers has also improved although more work is needed to ensure all care leavers have a record of their health history.

¹ 1 The findings in this report are based on a pilot undertaken by Ofsted to test new arrangements for the inspection of local authority children's social care services. The inspection framework and methodology used may change before Ofsted introduce the new arrangements in January 2018.

² The local authority's preferred social work model is Signs of Safety & Wellbeing.

What needs to improve

- Children's plans need to be clearer about the intended outcomes, and include specific actions and measurable timescales so that children, their families and the professionals involved with them know who needs to do what and by when.
- Make sure that every care leaver has a comprehensive record of his or her health history.
- The educational attainment and progress of children in care, particularly at key stage 4.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are good.

1. Early help is making a positive difference to the lives of children and families. Partners provide appropriate help and support when needs and risks are first identified. Children and families benefit from a good range of early help services. This includes help for families affected by domestic abuse or substance misuse. Early help providers use a range of different tools to track progress and evaluate impact.
2. Early help providers identify when children need additional or more specialist support from children's social care. The professional consultation line provides helpful advice, guidance and information. It is well used. As a result, partners make relevant and appropriate referrals to children's social care. They understand the importance of getting parental consent. This helps to ensure that children and families get the right help in the right way and at the right time.
3. The children and adult multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is well established. It is appropriately resourced and well managed. Thresholds are applied consistently. Information is shared appropriately. Decision-making is timely. Staff based in the MASH carefully review cases where there is a history of multiple contacts. They summarise concerns, analyse protective factors and identify the next steps. Allegations about professionals are promptly referred to the local authority's designated officer. The emergency duty team provides effective help and protection out of hours.
4. When children are at immediate risk of significant harm, prompt action is taken to safeguard and protect them. This applies equally to disabled children. Strategy meetings make appropriate decisions about s47 thresholds and ensure that investigations are well planned and co-ordinated. The right people are involved in these strategy meetings/discussions, which are clearly recorded. In the vast majority of cases seen, appropriate protective action is taken. Inspectors found no evidence of unnecessary delay.

5. Children are seen and seen alone. Once the MASH decides that an assessment is needed, the case cannot be closed until the child has been seen. Social workers and/or family practitioners talk to children and young people. They listen with care to what children and young people have to say. Inspectors saw some very good examples of direct work with children. However, direct work is not always well recorded.
6. Children and families benefit from assessments in which needs, risks and protective factors are carefully considered. Most assessments are detailed, analytical and child-centred. They take into account past events. Most include clear and concise danger statements. This makes it easier for families to understand what needs to change and what they need to do to make that happen.
7. Although every child has a plan and most plans are purposeful, they are not always sufficiently specific about who will do what by when. Many of them lack measurable outcomes. This makes it difficult to track progress. It also has the potential to dilute the focus and undermine accountability.
8. Contingency plans are not detailed or specific enough. Most do not provide a clear message about what will happen if things do not improve.
9. Despite the limitations of plans, professionals work together well to improve outcomes for children. They make good use of multi-agency meetings to do so. Child in need meetings, child protection conferences and core groups are generally well attended. They are also timely. Child protection conference chairs provide appropriate and effective challenge. In most cases, children and families benefit from the help and protection provided.
10. Help and protection is responsive to changing needs and circumstances. Managers and staff are taking full advantage of the opportunities provided by co-location. Communication is good. There is a strong sense of a continuum between child protection, children in need and early help. With very few exceptions, cases are appropriately stepped up from early help or child in need to child protection. The same applies to cases stepped down from child protection, or from child in need to early help. Most children and families are getting the right level of help and protection.
11. Thresholds for access to care are applied consistently. Pre-proceedings, the Public Law Outline (PLO) and legal strategy meetings are used effectively to promote positive outcomes for children. PLO letters are clear and explicit. This makes it easier for parents to understand what is expected of them. Good management oversight and effective tracking help to avoid drift or delay.
12. The disabled children and young people's team (DCYP) provides an effective service. Needs, risks and vulnerabilities are clearly identified. There is good engagement with parents. Social workers work hard to establish the wishes and feelings of disabled children, including those whose abilities to communicate verbally are either limited or non-existent. Children's views are

reflected in assessments and plans. The help and protection that disabled children receive are good.

13. Within the last 12 months, some social workers have not received regular supervision. This is a product of staffing difficulties. Nevertheless, inspectors concluded that there has been an appropriate level of management oversight. The quality of written care management direction is variable, but managers are involved in all key decisions. Inspectors found very little evidence of drift or delay.
14. Arrangements for responding to children who go missing have been strengthened. Most children who go missing from home or care have a return home interview (RHI). The missing children coordinator rigorously tracks the offer and completion of RHIs. Increasingly, RHIs are being used effectively to keep children safe from harm.
15. Suffolk county council has developed a whole-systems approach to dealing with child exploitation. The Making a Change team (MAC) has lead responsibility for the areas of child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and radicalisation. Working closely with the Youth Offending Service, MAC also leads on gangs. Information and intelligence are shared quickly and effectively. Complex strategy meetings are used to protect the most vulnerable.
16. Schools have got better at reporting children who are missing education (CME). The local authority has successfully reduced the substantial number of open CME cases from last year by almost two thirds. The local authority is aware of pupils who are being electively home educated.
17. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASCs) receive a warm and professional reception in Suffolk. The quality of the support and services for UASCs, coordinated by the Fostering Changes for Children team, are good.
18. Well-developed arrangements are in place to safeguard and protect children living in private fostering arrangements.
19. Vulnerable young people assessed as needing to come into care are accommodated³, but the experiences of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are variable. A very small number of them are placed temporarily in bed and breakfast accommodation when there is no suitable alternative and while efforts are made to facilitate their return home. Although the local authority risk assesses and carefully monitors these arrangements, they do not fully meet the needs of the young people concerned.

³ Accommodation in this context refers to the provision of accommodation under Section 20. Children Act 1989.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers and achieving permanence are good.

20. Most children come into care in a planned way. The local authority makes good use of its legal powers and acts decisively to protect children who are unable to continue to live at home safely.
21. The family solutions team provides intensive help and support for children and families at the edge of care. It is able to demonstrate its positive impact in preventing family breakdown and/or supporting reunification. However, the team does not currently have sufficient capacity to meet the level of need, particularly given its countywide brief. The local authority is expanding the service and has successfully applied to the Social Impact Bond for additional investment.
22. The quality of viability assessments seen by inspectors is good. So too is the quality of evidence presented in court. Social work reports are timely and well written. Good use is made of parallel planning. This helps to ensure that care, and other legal, proceedings are completed quickly. This avoids children having to wait longer than necessary for key decisions to be made about them and their lives.
23. Social workers clearly understand the importance of achieving permanence for children in care. Permanence planning starts early. Progress is rigorously tracked. The emphasis is always on finding the right long-term solution for each child. Good use is made of special guardianship orders or kinship care if they are the best options for children. When it is possible for children to go back to live with their birth families, reunification programmes are well planned and well managed.
24. Most children in care have settled placements. The proportion who live with foster carers has increased. The number of children who are living more than 20 miles from home has fallen. The vast majority of children in care have regular visits from their social workers.
25. Social workers know the children they work with really well. Assessments reflect children's wishes and feeling, hopes and fears. Contact arrangements are carefully considered. Care plans are generally easy to understand. Most are specific and measurable. They are reviewed at regular intervals and updated appropriately.
26. Reviews are timely. They are well attended and child-focused. They take full account of children's wishes and feelings. In most cases seen, independent reviewing officers provide an appropriate level of critical challenge. Education, health and care (EHC) plans seen by inspectors were clear and explicit.
27. Good attention is paid to the mental health and emotional well-being of children in care. Children in care and care leavers enjoy good access to a range of therapeutic services. In addition to the support provided by CAMHS, they are

able to access in-house psychological support. This input has helped to prevent placement breakdowns and promote the emotional well-being of children.

28. The Virtual School has been strengthened to ensure a sharper and more effective focus on the attainment and progress of children in care. Progress at Key Stage 4 is a concern. Last year it was below the national average for children in care. Attainment rose sharply two years ago, and is now in line with the national figures for these pupils, but has remained static. Although lower than comparators, persistent absence is still an issue and, while the number of fixed term exclusions has fallen, the average length of a fixed-term exclusion has increased. The Virtual School Head has plans to address areas of weakness and is driving improvement in the quality of personal education plans.
29. There is a strong focus on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Foster carers feel supported and receive regular supervision from their social workers. An effective training programme, which includes training around child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, missing from care and radicalisation, helps carers to provide good homes for children. Assessments and annual reviews of foster carers are thorough. Kinship carers are equally well supported. This helps to ensure that children are not looked after by unsuitable adults, or those who are unable to meet their needs.
30. Prospective adopters receive a prompt response and appropriate information to their enquiries. This enables them to make informed decisions about whether or not to apply. Assessments of prospective adopters are thorough. There is a good range of relevant training for adopters, as well as prospective adopters. This helps to ensure that they are able to provide good homes for children and respond to any issues or needs.
31. Adoption performance is strong. Children are well matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs, and are placed without delay. Post adoption support is good. Adopters talk very positively about their experiences.
32. The local authority is in touch with 96% of its care leavers. Personal advisers know their care leavers well. The percentage of care leavers who are in education, employment or training is above the national average. The range of semi-independent and supported accommodation options available to them has increased. Almost all care leavers live in suitable accommodation.
33. The quality of pathway plans is too variable, and many of them require improvement. A tendency to confuse goals with tasks, and/or break goals down into manageable bite-sized chunks, makes them less useful from the perspective of the individual care leaver. It also undermines their effectiveness. Added to this, arrangements for reviewing the progress of pathway plans once care leavers reach 18 years of age are not sufficiently robust.
34. Care leavers are able to access information online about their rights and entitlements, but too few of them have access to their full health histories. This hampers their ability to understand and manage their own health needs.

35. Local authority managers recognise that, while considerable progress has been made since the last inspection, there is still further to go in strengthening the support for care leavers. They have plans in place to address this.

The impact of leaders on practice with children and families is good.

36. The local authority's commitment to children and families is clear and unambiguous. Senior managers and council leaders work well together to drive continuous improvement. They share an accurate and well-developed understanding of strengths and areas for development. They have acted on the recommendations made at the time of the last inspection. However, not all of the recommendations have been fully implemented and, as a result, some aspects of services, such as support for care leavers and child in need plans, are not yet good. Even so, there is an upwards trajectory of improvement. There is clear evidence of progress and impact.
37. Senior managers lead by example. They want the best for children, young people and families. They set and expect high standards of themselves and others. They understand the importance of getting the basics right. Their value-based approach is unfussy, clear-sighted, and recognises the need for persistence. They are a stable and settled group. The fact that they 'keep on keeping on' is paying real dividends.
38. Partnership working, particularly with the police and with health services, is strong. This is evident in the way in which the MASH has developed. It is also apparent in the role played by health partners in early help. However, in its current form, the multi-agency neglect strategy is unconvincing. Senior managers acknowledge that the neglect strategy action plan is neither specific nor measurable.
39. The local authority is developing a record of intelligent and astute innovation in response to identified shortfalls or emerging issues. For example, the Positive Choices project is helping women to break the cycle of having their children repeatedly removed from their care. Another example is the introduction of the Mockingbird Family Model, which is about to go live and is designed to empower foster families to support each other and offer children support from a network of known foster families. Allied to an ability to attract inward investment, this willingness to innovate is making a difference to children and families in Suffolk.
40. The local authority takes its corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. The Corporate Parenting Board's (CPB) priorities are clearly articulated. The CPB is in touch with the experiences of children in care and care leavers. Board members provide robust and effective challenge. Action is being taken to raise the achievement and progress of children in care and care leavers.
41. Senior managers are not afraid to make difficult commissioning, or decommissioning, decisions. For example, they have recently brought the

leaving care service back in-house and are taking appropriate action to ensure that care leavers receive a consistently good service. Judicious commissioning is also increasing the range of placement and accommodation options available. This is particularly true for older children and young people.

42. The way in which the local authority has rolled out its preferred social work model across all children and young people's services is extremely impressive. The implementation process has been rigorous and systematic. The model is encouraging social workers and other staff to work more effectively with families. The local authority's preferred method of social work has given workers a shared language. It means that they are more able to identify and address difficult issues with families. It also means that families are better able to understand what needs to change.
43. Middle and senior managers have a good understanding of what is happening at the frontline. They make intelligent use of data and performance management information. Locality management and weekly team meetings complement this approach. Assessment coordinators play a critical role in tracking performance and compliance. The spreadsheets that they use are manually generated, but they are effective. This helps to avoid drift or delay for children and families.
44. Audits are being used to evaluate the quality and impact of practice. Most are accurate. The results are routinely shared with managers and staff. But the quality of case management audits is variable. Some are too dependent on yes/no responses and provide relatively little in the way of illustration or critical comment. Inspectors also found that the local authority's auditors have overestimated the quality of children's plans. The local authority assessed that 71% of plans were good or better. Inspectors concluded that less than one third were.
45. The local authority is in touch with children and young people, listens to them and acts on their voice. The latest annual report on service user feedback records key messages from children and young people about their experiences of early help, child protection conferences, child in care reviews and leaving care. The influence of children and young people on the design, development and delivery of services is clear. For example, care plans are now written in the form of a series of promises to the young person concerned.
46. The local authority has used a range of creative approaches to try to ensure that the workforce is sufficient. The recruitment and retention strategy has been repeatedly refreshed and now includes a rental deposit scheme. The recruitment microsite has also been updated. Staff turnover is at the lowest it has been for two years, but in the last 12 months, the vacancy rate peaked at 14%, with Lowestoft and Waveney being hardest hit. This has had an impact on caseloads, some of which senior managers have correctly identified as being too high.

47. Recognising the critical importance of relationships in social work, senior managers consciously try to treat their staff in the same way that they would want their staff to treat children and families. Staff are valued, nurtured, supported and challenged. They are consulted about significant developments. Monthly half-day practitioner workshops help to keep them informed, involved and motivated. The local authority invests heavily in the training and professional development of its staff. Newly qualified staff are protected during their assessed and supported year in employment. Sickness and absences rates are low. Morale is good. There is a real sense of staff working well together to improve outcomes for children and young people.