

# Inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services

Devon County Council

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Royal Exchange Buildings  
St Ann's Square  
Manchester, M2 7LA

T: 08456 404040  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

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## About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded and to determine the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of five Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and one inspector from the Care Quality Commission. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004. An additional HMI undertook a simultaneous inspection of local authority contact, assessment and referral arrangements. The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.

2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:

- discussions with 37 children and young people receiving services, 37 parents and carers, front-line managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Devon Safeguarding Children Board (DSCB), elected members and a range of community representatives.
- analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the children and young people's plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision and the evaluations of five serious case reviews undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with 'Working Together To Safeguard Children', 2006.
- a review of 74 case files for children and young people with a range of needs. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision-making undertaken.
- the outcomes of a simultaneous evaluation of the local authority referral and consultation unit and two assessment teams.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Service information

4. Devon has nearly 164,000 children and young people under the age of 19 years. This is 21.8% of the total population in the county. The proportion entitled to free school meals is below the national average. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 1.13% of the total population, compared with 21.3% in the country as a whole. This includes 480 children and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. The proportion of pupils with English as an additional language is well below national figures.

5. The Devon Strategic Partnership was set up in 2001 and the Children's Trust established in 2004. The trust includes representatives of the Devon Primary Care Trust (PCT), Devon and Cornwall Police Authority, Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, Cornwall and Devon Connexions, Devon and Cornwall Learning and Skills Council, district councils, community and voluntary organisations, schools and the further education sector. The DSCB is independently chaired and brings together the main organisations working with children, young people and families in Devon to deliver safeguarding services.

6. Social care services for children have 261 foster carers, five children's homes, including one for respite care and one secure unit. Community-based services are provided by one central referral and consultation unit, 10 assessment teams, one private fostering team, four safeguarding teams, six looked after children teams and three care leaver teams. Other family support services are delivered by 42 children's centres and three family centres.

7. At the time of the inspection there were 550 looked after children. They comprise 96 children under five years of age, 394 children of school age (5–16) and 60 post-16 or care leavers. Devon uses a virtual school approach in its support of looked after children to emphasise the individual achievements of children, celebrate their successes, highlight gifted and talented children and support care leavers into further and higher education provision.

8. Commissioning and planning of national health services and primary care is carried out by Devon PCT. Acute hospital services are provided by two Foundation Trusts and two National Health Service Trusts (NHS). Mental health services are provided by the Devon Partnership NHS Trust and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services by Devon PCT Provider Services.

## The inspection outcomes: Safeguarding services

### Overall effectiveness

### Grade 3 (Adequate)

9. The overall effectiveness of the service provided is adequate. Significant improvements to safeguarding services have been made since the joint area review in 2006. Many of the improvements are still in the early stages of development and/or implementation and there are some areas where the required level of improvement is only just being satisfactorily achieved. A very strong commitment from all professionals to a child-centred approach underpins service delivery. The children's social care electronic records system is inadequate and not fit for purpose. Consequently, time constraints imposed by the system limit the efficient and effective use of social work time for direct intervention with children, young people and families. However, practice observed and evaluated by inspectors did not identify any unsafe practice.

10. Improvements have been made to the leadership of the safeguarding and child protection services. Until 2008, the DSCB was not functioning effectively and partner agencies did not fully discharge their responsibilities associated with their duty to cooperate. The appointment in September 2008 of an independent chair and the reconstitution of the board has ensured there is now sufficient seniority of membership to provide good leadership. The DSCB has now assumed its full role in promoting child protection and safeguarding and in holding agencies to account for their performance in these areas.

### Capacity for improvement

### Grade 3 (Adequate)

11. Capacity for improvement is adequate overall. The senior management team responsible for children's social care services is relatively new and although driving forward a comprehensive improvement agenda, has had insufficient time to demonstrate a record of sustainable improvement. The partnership is committed to improving service delivery, for example in the significant work on Children's Trust governance and accountability, including a newly constituted Board for the Children's Trust. National resource considerations are expected to become increasingly challenging and may result in some constraint on service planning and delivery. However, improved joint commissioning and integrated working are supporting the partnership in maximising resources to deliver better outcomes for children and young people.

### Areas for improvement

12. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Devon the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

**Immediately:**

- Improve the quality of social work case recording and ensure effective performance management oversight of the content of the files.

**Within three months:**

- Ensure delays in finding alternative educational placements for some pupils with statements of special educational needs are addressed as a key priority particularly those who are not receiving full-time education.
- Ensure the full implementation of the common assessment framework ensuring there is joint ownership amongst partners.
- Ensure that core group meetings are convened with sufficient frequency and regularity to facilitate working together, monitor actions and outcomes against the child protection plan and make any necessary alterations as circumstances change.
- Ensure workloads in children's social care services are fully reviewed to ascertain whether there are capacity issues or whether there are more effective ways of delivering front-line services.
- Devon PCT to ensure active progress on setting up a child sexual abuse examination service in Devon.
- Devon PCT to actively progress the deployment of its dedicated budget allocation for children's services to ensure sufficient capacity to support preventative work with children and families.

**Within six months**

- Ensure an electronic records system is in place that is fit for purpose.
- Ensure a single, corporate and comprehensive database is in place to record vetting and barring checks undertaken on all staff that work with or are in close contact with children.

**Outcomes for children and young people****The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe                      Grade 3 (Adequate)**

13. Schools and other settings take adequate steps to ensure that children are safe. Ofsted inspections of school and early years provision indicate that clear and comprehensive procedures are in place to safeguard children and young people. A wide range of activities are provided by schools, children's centres, the new learning communities and youth services to encourage children, young

people and their carers to be aware of safety issues both within their homes and the wider community. The proportion of extended schools with full access to childcare increased from 53% to 87% in 2008–09 providing additional support to parents and carers.

14. Since the joint area review in 2006, the recording and monitoring systems for the vetting and barring of staff in children's services have greatly improved and are now well-managed and meet statutory requirements. However, there is currently no overarching record system for all staff that work with, or are in close contact with, children and young people. For example, children's services do not hold centralised records for escorts, youth workers or cleaners and there are no formal mechanisms in place to quality assure the parallel procedures for those services that manage their own checks. Records are currently held on one of three databases and whilst the inspection found no evidence of procedures not being followed, the lack of a single, corporate and comprehensive database presents a risk to the authority.

15. The availability of effective services for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved. Families are benefiting from increased access to direct payments, carers' breaks, respite care and the Stepping Stones programme, all of which are helping to maintain the safe care of children and young people within their own homes. Improved health information at the point of diagnosis is welcomed by parents as it provides opportunities for early intervention and support. Good person-centred plans are in place for most children in special schools with a strong emphasis on meeting the needs of the individual to help them stay safe and achieve well. While parents report that access to and the quality of services for children with disabilities has improved significantly over the past four years they highlight that with the closure of day centres there is inadequate provision for young people with very complex health needs over the age of 16. The engagement of adult mental health services in transition planning remains underdeveloped.

16. Delays in the provision of alternative placements for some children and young people with statements of special educational needs, particularly those with emotional, behavioural or social difficulties result in them being inappropriately permanently excluded from school. At the time of inspection the needs of 40 pupils with identified needs were not appropriately met. Some pupils are receiving alternative education; however, 29 of the 40 are not receiving full-time education thus placing them at risk. Because there are no places available within Devon some pupils have been waiting a year or more for an appropriate placement to be secured. This is unacceptable.

17. Safeguarding arrangements are good for the identification and tracking of children missing from education. To ensure home elective education is appropriate for those children and young people who have been withdrawn from school the elective home education service makes check visits at five days, six weeks and 12 weeks. As a consequence of strong partnership working and improved monitoring systems the number of missing children has significantly



reduced from 2800 in 2006 to 72 at the time of the inspection with on-going tracking activity to trace the 72 missing children.

18. Partnership working with the police is good with direct positive impact on outcomes for young people. There is a good overall reduction in both first-time and re-offending and at 1.8% (17 young people) Devon has one of the lowest custody rates in the country. Direct work focusing on the links between offending and missing children has been successful; engagement with 84 children and young people since November 2008 has resulted in a 61% reduction in repeat missing episodes and a 20% reduction in reports of missing children. Improved joint working arrangements are in place to share information relating to domestic violence incidents with health and children's social care to enable appropriate safeguarding decisions to be made. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences and multi-agency public protection arrangements are good with improved safeguarding outcomes for children delivered as a result of the wider multi-agency membership and attendance. For example; joint working ensured closing the loophole that allowed photographs of children to be sent to people in prison without the prison first ascertaining the relationship between the child and prisoner.

**The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people feel safe** **Grade 3 (Adequate)**

19. Effective action is being taken to ensure that children and young people feel safe. The increasing availability of independent advocacy has had a positive impact on the attendance and confidence of children and young people to participate fully in their child protection conferences and to have their views supported or represented. Similarly, the support provided by young carers' groups has proved effective in enabling group members to feel more confident in talking to parents and teachers when they have concerns or worries.

20. Surveys indicate that the majority of children feel safe and that most know where to access help and advice if they need it. Children and young people have good opportunities to make their views known on a wide range of safeguarding topics through regular consultation events, student councils and other fora and have been effective in having their voice heard. However, minority groups remain under-represented, for example the Traveller community and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

21. To reduce bullying is a key priority in the children and young people's plan. Schools have been working to reduce bullying through the training of a number of peer mentors, young cultural champions, the Social and Emotional Aspects to Learning Programme and other initiatives. Young scrutiny committee members have researched and presented to senior managers their 'Good Bus, Bad Bus' project raising concerns from their peers about bullying on school buses. There is on-going work to address the young people's concerns. However, despite the positive attention and guidance given in schools to reducing bullying, a proportion of young people report being worried about

bullying especially in areas outside school. While a number of projects have been set up to identify and address bullying there is no formalised collection or collation of information, other than required racist incident reporting. Finding ways of measuring the impact of the considerable range of initiatives to tackle bullying remains a challenge to the partnership.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 3 (Adequate)**

22. The quality of safeguarding provision has improved significantly since the joint area review in 2006 when staying safe was judged to be inadequate. The workforce across children's services is very responsive to concerns about children's well-being and safety. In the majority of cases, assessments are child-focused with the views and feelings of the child and family taken fully into account. Child protection reviews are held on time and risks and protective factors are mostly identified in an appropriate and timely manner. Overall, there is sufficient analysis to ensure that the child or young person's needs are appropriately met. Parents of children at risk of exclusion and parents at a children's centre visited during the inspection, report that the support provided is effective in building their confidence in parenting and reducing the risk of their children being taken into care.

23. Service responsiveness is adequate. The establishment of the referral and consultation unit, which provides a range of advice on safeguarding issues has impacted positively on referring agencies. More feel confident in seeking advice on safeguarding concerns thus improving the quality of referrals made. However, there is still inconsistency of understanding within some agencies and work is in progress to review and revise the thresholds for access to children's services. Partnership work at the operational level between the police, health and children's social care services is good overall and improving. The common assessment framework is not yet in place across the whole of the county. Where it is fully operational, it is proving effective in supporting early intervention and preventative work. Monitoring of the common assessment framework demonstrates improvements for children and young people in 63% of interventions. In addition to single agency training, multi-agency training has been delivered to over 1000 professionals with full roll-out scheduled for completion during 2009.

24. Response times to referrals have improved with a rapid and effective screening of initial referrals. However, some initial assessments are completed and closed down without either the child being seen or without sufficient consultation with other agencies. Re-referral rates are high resulting in some initial assessments having to be repeated. Although most cases are allocated promptly to suitably qualified staff, action taken to improve the transfer of cases from the assessment teams to the longer term teams has not been fully realised. Furthermore, once transfer is effected and dependent upon the circumstances of a case, a child or family may have a number of changes of social worker if the case moves between specialisms. The practice of counting one family as one case masks the actual number of cases allocated to a social

worker. This can impact negatively on workloads, disguise actual capacity and increase the risk of individual children's needs not being fully recognised and addressed.

25. The instigation of core assessments in cases where children are subject to formal child protection investigation is adequate and in most cases compliant with statutory requirements. However, although work on cases was completed, it is not consistently recorded as such on the system and overdue processes are not sufficiently rigorously addressed by line managers. Consequently, data used to measure performance is unreliable. Internal random case file auditing has recently been introduced and early findings suggest qualitative as well as quantitative issues are now identified and addressed. To ensure standards of practice are raised an on-going audit programme is planned to continue throughout 2009 and beyond.

26. Whilst case planning is adequate and in some instances good, the recording is of variable quality and not commented upon by supervising managers. A majority of the cases sampled during this inspection show adequate child protection plans and visiting frequency often above that which is statutorily required. Whilst files sampled demonstrated improved multi-agency attendance and planning at child protection conferences and core group meetings, an internal case file audit of 147 child protection cases undertaken in March 2009 identified the infrequency of core group meetings as unacceptable in 31% of audit returns. Children, young people, their parents/carers are fully involved in the planning process. However, workload pressures on social workers result in pre-conference reports not always being shared with families in advance of the conference which at times causes distress and adversely impedes some families' ability to contribute effectively.

27. The clear focus by services on direct work with children and families is good but is often provided at the expense of maintaining up-to-date electronic recording. The current electronic recording system is not fit for purpose. Therefore, as a tool to be used with others to make local judgements about the safety of children and young people it is unreliable and high risk. Consequently, social workers rely on a combination of electronic and paper records and their own notebooks in which to record case work details. In some of the cases sampled, there was not a complete set of notes in either the electronic or paper files. In some instances there are significant delays in recording and in others recording is non-compliant with statutory requirements thus rendering the process inaccurate and unreliable.

28. Whilst child protection records in the school files sampled for the inspection demonstrate generally good knowledge of the child, most were poorly structured and organised. Following the outcomes of serious case reviews, the local authority has written to all schools with guidance on the management of child protection files and provided some training sessions to improve practice in this area. This has been welcomed by school staff and heightened awareness of the need to maintain accurate records.

29. The council is aware of what improvements need to be made to practice in front-line services and has a change management programme in place to address these issues. For example, partnership with a university to provide accredited training for front-line managers, additional investment in recruiting qualified social workers, improving the overall quality of practice and exploring alternative electronic record systems. At the time of inspection work was already underway to deliver the identified changes. In early 2009, to increase capacity and provide an outward facing approach, a small team of independent social care consultants was commissioned to support social care in delivering the required changes.

30. Training in safer recruitment and management of allegations against staff is raising awareness. Monitoring of referrals demonstrates that statutory agencies are referring cases appropriately to the local authority designated officer with resolution completed in a timely manner. For example; 41 out of 71 cases were resolved within one month. Complaints made by children and families are handled correctly with appropriate support systems in place to assist children and young people to make complaints. Response times are improving with 77% responded to within 20 days. In addition to a comprehensive annual report, a quarterly report is produced to identify the issues and disseminate learning that has arisen from the complaints.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 3 (Adequate)**

31. The leadership and management of safeguarding services for children and young people is adequate overall. Effective service provision has been enhanced by the quality of a new senior management team within children's services, appointed in late 2008. This together with the commissioning of additional consultant capacity is rapidly driving forward the improvement agenda. While there is cross party political support for the delivery of children's services, it is too soon to judge the impact of the new administration on the stability of existing service planning.

32. The updated children and young people's plan is based on a thorough needs analysis and is clear in its ambition and priorities. Safeguarding children and young people is at the heart of the plan and clearly reflected and articulated by staff at all levels within children's services. There are strong links between the plan, the Children's Trust, the DSCB business plan and the Local Area Agreement. The plan is accompanied by a robust joint commissioning strategy demonstrating some good outcomes for children and young people. An example is the 'Options Appraisal' model that has improved stability for some children and young people with complex needs. Devon was awarded Beacon status in March 2009 for its strategic commissioning work.

33. The DSCB is now more effective in its professional and community leadership role. The appointment of an independent chairperson in September 2008 and the reconstitution of the DSCB have resulted in good leadership and challenge to partner agencies. Partners are now very clear that they have a

statutory duty to cooperate and to discharge their duties accordingly, a feature that had been previously missing and reflected in the lack of seniority of agency representatives attending board meetings. While the DSCB minutes reflect the good progress made since September 2008 it remains too soon to judge how well embedded the changes are or for any subsequent impact to show. Ofsted evaluated five serious case reviews produced by Devon during 2008, all relating to incidents in 2006 and 2007. Four were judged to be inadequate. Following the subsequent review by the serious case review sub-group and resubmission they were all judged adequate. The learning arising out of these reviews has been disseminated to a wide multi-agency audience and positively received. For example; schools have a better understanding of and are more engaged in child protection processes.

34. The corporate process for performance management is well established with regular reporting to the council's cabinet and scrutiny committees. However, accurate reporting of performance in children's services is undermined by the lack of integrity in the local performance management data submitted to the corporate processes. A recently established joint agency performance management group is focusing on changing the culture across organisations from quantitative to qualitative performance management. A recent exercise of a multi-agency case file audit involved all agencies in jointly identifying and addressing poor quality practice issues. The exercise proved beneficial in improving the quality of practice across all agencies so further regular audits are planned.

35. Although there is a children's workforce strategy in place its effectiveness has been limited by lack of strategic ownership across partners, resources and good information. Until early 2009 there were many vacancies within children's services for qualified social workers. Increased investment by the council of £1m to recruit to social work posts has been successful in recruiting qualified staff. It is planned that all social work posts will be filled by September 2009. Although there has been a reduction from 25% in February 2009 to 15% in June 2009, significant staffing deficits remain within the health community for health visitors and school nurses. The vacancy levels are due in part to the PCT's delay in deploying its budget allocation for children's services. The combined effect of the funding and vacancy issues has resulted in inconsistent access across the county to health services and insufficient capacity to support preventative work with children and families.

36. Service users' views are used well to inform strategic developments and in individual case planning processes. However, users are not sufficiently involved in service evaluation. The voice of children and young people is valued and there are good examples of their active involvement in influencing the council and the work of the Children's Trust. Young Scrutiny and Young Commissioner groups have presented well researched issues to elected members and senior officers. They believe their input is valued and give examples of where they have made a difference. Kongamana and more recently the Kongaminis, young people's consultation events are effective in bringing together children and

young people county-wide. At the 2008 event, participants identified as a key issue their need for more sexual health information. Consequently, this is being taken forward by the PCT.

37. Partnership working is good overall. Working relationships at strategic and operational levels are generally positive with some good examples of partnership working with voluntary and community groups. The adoption of effective partnership working with district housing authorities has helped to reduce youth homelessness by 50%. However, the lack of funding for health services has led to an inability to support the delivery of some safeguarding services. For example; there is still no child sexual abuse examination service in Devon despite having been in the planning stages for four years and early agreement having been given to setting up this service. The DSCB minutes record that this has had a significant adverse impact on children who were not examined, on additional evidence lost and unknown impact on their morbidity.

38. Outcomes and leadership on equality and diversity in safeguarding are adequate overall and good in a number of individual cases. A strategy for equality and diversity is in place and the council has achieved Level 3 of the equality standard. Equality impact assessments are in place for some service areas but a significant number have still to be completed. Professionals across all agencies report that their awareness and understanding of diversity issues has improved significantly in recent years. The needs assessment for the children and young people's plan has identified well the relevant issues, specifically identifying as key priorities the under-achievement of some groups and lack of equity in access to services particularly for those living in rural areas. Plans are underway to improve the collection and analysis of data to monitor outcomes and to use local commissioning to meet identified need. The inspection has identified examples of good initiatives and projects across partners which are making a difference to individual children and groups. These include: sensitivity to cultural issues and meeting need in individual cases; instituting initiatives to address race and hate crime and homophobic bullying; training young people as cultural champions to visit schools and talk with peers; and 'Every Young Traveller matters'. Despite the good progress made in many areas, it is still too early to measure impact and progress.

39. The achievement of value-for-money is adequate overall with some good aspects. The council aligns resources to reflect its strategic and operational priorities. Outcome-based joint commissioning arrangements are strong and well resourced to provide services to children and young people with complex needs. Learning from serious case reviews has had a positive impact on commissioning arrangements and resulted in the development of a commissioning board for vulnerable young people and well-focused work on ensuring safe placements for vulnerable adolescents. The council has invested in a number of measures to improve outcomes and reduce costs. Investments include the commissioning of preventative positive activities for teenagers, continued piloting of the budget holding lead professional and devolved budget to special schools for direct commissioning of therapies and preventative

interventions to support families. However, within children's services issues of workload pressures, poor performance management, allocation arrangements and distances travelled have not been sufficiently well analysed to ensure that workforce capacity is being best utilised.

## The inspection outcomes: services for looked after children

### Overall effectiveness

### Grade 2 (Good)

40. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people are good. Health outcomes are good overall and are continuing to demonstrate year-on-year improvement. Good arrangements are in place to enable looked after children and young people to stay safe. Whilst short-term placement stability is good, securing stability in long-term placements remains a challenge for the council. An insufficient supply and variety of foster home placements result in some children and young people having to move away from their home localities. There is a particular shortage of foster carers for unplanned placements, which in some cases results in additional placement moves. Outcomes in enjoying and achieving are good overall with improved educational attainment of looked after children. Similarly children with complex needs are enabled to stay in their school and home through good joint integrated team support thus avoiding placement out-of-county. Looked after children and young people are on the whole successful in making a positive contribution; they participate in a wide range of cultural, leisure and democratic activities. An increasing number feel they are listened to and have a real voice in influencing service provision. Opportunities to achieve economic well-being are good. The number of young people entering into education, employment or training continues to rise. Successful transition to adult mental health services for some young people who have received a high level of support from children's services is inconsistent. There is continuing work in progress to address this issue.

### Capacity for improvement

### Grade 2 (Good)

41. The council and its partners have good capacity for improvement. Statutory requirements are met and there is clear evidence of significant improvement in the quality of care provided by the local authority. Looked after children and care leavers make good contributions to evaluating the effectiveness of some provision and informing service improvements. Elected members take an active and direct interest in the well-being and progress of looked after children and young people. They receive regular reports on outcomes and if necessary will provide effective challenge to officers. The Chief Executive is a champion for looked after children and Devon's corporate parenting ethos ensures that all members of staff are aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents.

### Areas for improvement

42. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and care leavers in Devon the local authority and its partners should take the following action:



**Immediately:**

- There are no recommendations for immediate action.

**Within three months:**

- Ensure consideration is given to establishing family group conferencing as part of the work with families and children on the edge of care.
- Ensure appropriate interventions are in place to reduce the offending and re-offending rates of looked after children and young people.
- Ensure health input into transition planning is secured from adult services for those young people with complex needs.

**Within six months:**

- Reduce further fixed-term exclusions and improve the attendance at school of looked after children.

**Outcomes for children and young people      Grade 2 (Good)**

43. Health outcomes are good with continued good performance in ensuring that all looked after children receive full health and dental checks. Where additional treatment is required it is followed up in an appropriate and timely manner. Attitudes towards healthy lifestyles have improved by adapting the healthy schools programme to that of healthy children's homes. Three children's homes have already gained accreditation. Children and young people are encouraged and supported well to participate in hobbies and physical activities. Action is being taken to address the sexual health needs of looked after children with the launch of a sexual health strategy in April 2009. Designated nurses for looked after children are actively involved in providing on-going advice and guidance to care leavers. Care leavers report they very much welcome this approach and the level of support provided to encourage them as adults to continue accessing appropriate mainstream medical services. Looked after children have precedence in accessing the child and adolescent mental health service. Improved timeliness of access to services and treatment is aiding placement stability.

44. Children and young people in care are safeguarded well in their placements and there has been significant improvement in the quality of care provided by the local authority. Ofsted inspections of children's homes, fostering and adoption services confirm these improvements. Care planning is good and reviewing processes are robust with evidence of appropriate challenge. Decision-making and permanency planning is managed well with 37 children and young people achieving permanency through adoption and special guardianship orders during 2007-08. Performance on short-term placement stability is good. Whilst all looked after children and young people are allocated

to a qualified social worker a number of young people have experienced several changes of social worker. This has been partially redressed by the consistency and stability of the independent reviewing officers.

45. The impact of agencies in enabling looked after children and young people to enjoy and achieve is good overall. Educational attainment for looked after children and young people is a key priority. Some good nurturing and mentoring schemes, together with increased training of foster carers, are helping to improve educational attainment. Within school looked after children are well supported by designated teachers, education welfare officers and extended services. Transfers between schools are supported well. Most looked after children have personal education plans which are monitored by the council to challenge poor practice and disseminate learning. Looked after children themselves have noticed the increased focus on educational achievement reporting "all we ever hear from our social workers is education, education, education".

46. The progress of looked after children is monitored rigorously wherever they are placed and the council is persistent in ensuring all information is returned from every setting. Annual returns are reviewed by locality-based multi-practitioner groups and any gaps or under-performance followed up effectively. Good joint working through integrated teams is enabling children with complex needs to stay in their school and home to avoid out-of-county placements. As a result, 84 children with complex needs are in shared care between the council and home and only four looked after children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are placed out-of-county.

47. Educational achievement at Key Stages 2 and 3 has improved steadily over the past three years. The gap between looked after children in Devon and other Devon children has been narrowing steadily with a significant improvement in English and maths at both key stages. At Key Stage 4, the percentage of looked after children achieving five GCSEs grades A\*-C has doubled over the past three years from 7.9% to 16.7%. For the past two years, performance has been above the national average for looked after children. Looked after children have access to a good range of additional opportunities and activities supported well by the creative use of personal education allowances. For example, 10% of looked after children are learning to play a musical instrument.

48. No looked after child or young person has been permanently excluded from school for the last two years and the numbers of fixed-term exclusions has reduced from 97 to 82. However, there is an increasing number of looked after young people who are undertaking a managed transfer. The numbers of looked after children and young people missing schooling for more than 25 days is not significantly improving and remains a priority for the council as it remained higher than the national average during 2007-08. Good procedures are in place for tracking individuals but up-to-date information could not be provided at the

time of the inspection which suggests the system for the regular collation of the data is not sufficiently robust.

49. Opportunities for looked after children and young people to make a positive contribution are good. They are encouraged and supported to participate in a wide range of cultural, leisure and democratic activities. They are proud of the achievements they gain and are very positive about the skills they develop. For example; some young people spoken with at the recent annual awards ceremony confirmed how much their confidence had been raised by their involvement with Devon Action and for some the positive education, employment and training opportunities the scheme had provided them with. All very much valued the support and encouragement to succeed provided by their personal workers. However, work undertaken to reduce offending has yet to show any impact. The proportion of looked after children receiving final warnings, reprimands and convictions is increasing and is significantly higher than that of similar councils.

50. Opportunities for looked after children and young people to achieve economic well-being are good. Care leavers are increasingly being accommodated in supported lodgings or independent living beyond the age of 18. The importance of the continuing engagement of young people in education beyond 16 is understood and supported well by all agencies working with young people and their carers. 'Aim Higher' is being used effectively to raise aspirations. Partnership working between care leaver services, Connexions and further education colleges is good with an agreed protocol in place to monitor the take-up of post-16 placements and the progress of care leavers. More looked after young people are continuing in learning post-16 with improved trends in retention.

51. Care leavers are provided with very good support to continue into higher education. Apart from financial support, as corporate parents the council ensures that the young people have mentors, support visits to universities and maintains their foster placement for them to return to. As a result of such practical support and raising aspirations, increasing numbers of looked after children are going into higher education: 10 in 2008-09; 22 in 2009-10 and three being supported on post-graduate courses. However, there is only a limited range of opportunities and provision post-16 for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. This has been recognised by the council who are currently piloting a virtual sixth form centre in North Devon. Health and social care input into transition planning for children with complex needs is not yet secure.

## **The quality of provision**

## **Grade 3 (Adequate)**

52. Until recently Devon has been successful in reducing the numbers of looked after children by investing in family support and preventative services. Admissions to care are appropriate and controlled by clear thresholds and robust decision-making pathways. However, more young people become looked

after during adolescence than in similar councils. Since April 2009, the numbers of looked after children are starting to increase with court directed placements contributing to the increase. Planning of support for individual children and parenting capacity is generally informed by timely assessment. However, support and care within a child's community has not always been identified at an early stage and family group conferencing has not been used to enable a more pro-active approach in working with children and young people on the edge of care. Review reports are not always shared with parents or carers.

53. Recent Ofsted inspections of regulated provision judged the adoption service and one children's home to be outstanding and the fostering service and two children's homes to be good. The secure unit was judged to be inadequate overall. Appropriate remedial action is in place to address deficiencies. Care provision is adequate overall with the majority of children and young people placed in foster care. Although a higher proportion of young people are in residential care than in comparable councils, the inspection found no evidence to support that placements were inappropriate. Foster carers are well supported. Good partnership working between the child and adolescent mental health placement support officers and foster carers and a pilot monthly clinic where foster carers can self-refer have had a positive impact in helping foster carers manage challenging behaviour. The impact of this service has yet to be evaluated but positive feedback suggests that it is improving stability of placement in some individual cases.

54. Effective action has been taken to improve placement stability. There is some evidence of the strategy beginning to impact positively in reducing the number of children who have more than three placements. The options appraisal approach used by the joint commissioning team has been independently and positively evaluated. It is demonstrating improved relationships with independent providers, influencing the market and creating more placement capacity locally. Outcomes are well monitored. However, securing long-term stability still remains a high priority for the council and there is evidence that in some cases the options appraisal approach is not always initiated at an early enough stage.

55. Looked after children have access to good support services, including independent advocacy and complaints. However, the independent visiting service for looked after children remains underdeveloped. Frontiers and Devon Action provide outstanding support to help children and young people increase their self-esteem and achieve their potential. Services to support care leavers are good with increased participation between organisations and the care leaving team to meet a young person's need. For example, homelessness prevention panels are having a positive impact in ensuring that care leavers have suitable accommodation. Although the majority of care leavers have a pathway plan, these are not of sufficient quality. Work is currently being undertaken to ensure improvements.

56. Case planning, reviews and recording are adequate. In files sampled during the inspection there are some good examples of multi-agency planning, however this is not consistently robust. Reviewing processes are good and held within statutory timescales. Advocacy services are available to ensure looked after children fully engage in their review. Recording is not always timely and the current electronic records system is not fit for purpose.

57. A good needs analysis and mapping has identified around 700 children and young people placed by other authorities in independent provision within Devon. The partnership has developed good tracking arrangements and negotiated either reciprocal or bill-back arrangements to ensure those children and young people have timely access to appropriate health services.

## **Leadership and management**

## **Grade 2 (Good)**

58. Leadership and management of services for looked after children are good. Across the partnership there is a very strong commitment and passion from key agencies to deliver improved outcomes for looked after children. Promoting the safety and well-being is at the heart of all activities and engagements with looked after children.

59. Devon's ambition and priorities for looked after children are high. They are reflected well in the children and young people's plan which is underpinned by a thorough needs analysis. The theme of 'Narrowing the Gap' is present throughout the entire plan and overt in such areas as improving outcomes for looked after children, children with disabilities and care leavers.

60. There is a very strong culture of corporate parenting at all levels within Devon County Council. Elected members receive training and meet regularly with young people. They receive appropriate information on the progress of looked after children and provide good levels of challenge to officers. The corporate parenting mentoring scheme established in 2007 has engaged mentors from across all six directorates within the council and aims to increase educational attainment and improve placement stability. Evaluation of the project demonstrates positive impact on outcomes for the 19 young people aged 11–18 who receive mentoring. However, the success of the Devon-wide scheme is not achieving its full potential because it has not recruited mentors from District councils or partner organisations from wider geographic locations.

61. Performance management systems for managers to ensure statutory visits are made within timescales, that children are seen alone and reviews are held on time are adequate. Monitoring of commissioning arrangements has led to improved outcomes for children and young people. Supervision of staff within children's services is generally carried out in accordance with the policy. However, the quality of decision-making is not consistently reflected in the records.

62. Looked after children are listened to and their views incorporated into individual planning and in developing services. Young people have designed and delivered training to foster carers and elected members and have produced a number of DVDs to provide information to other young people in care. The advocacy service is pro-active in visiting children's homes, but the independent visitor service is underdeveloped. The recently established Children in Care Council reports positively on its role and function and believes that it has a real opportunity to represent peers and influence service planning and delivery for looked after children.

63. The promotion of equality and diversity for looked after children are adequate overall with some very good aspects in meeting individual need. The needs assessment for the children and young people's plan has identified well the relevant issues, specifically identifying as a key priority for action by partners the need to ensure the welfare, safeguarding and achievement of looked after children is positively promoted.

64. Value-for-money in the provision of services for looked after children and young people is good. There is good prioritisation of services contributing to the wider safeguarding agenda and action is being taken to protect these services from cuts required to deliver efficiency savings. The directorate follows a bi-monthly cycle of budget monitoring in line with corporate reporting requirements. More volatile areas of service delivery, for example placement services for looked after children are monitored on a monthly basis. Weekly placement panel information provides the basis of projections and is routinely shared with the early years and families sector.

## Record of main findings: Devon

<b>Safeguarding services</b>	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
<b>Outcomes for children and young people</b>	
Children and young people are safe: effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe	Adequate
Children and young people feel safe: effectiveness of services in helping to ensure that children and young people feel safe	Adequate
<b>Quality of provision</b>	
Service responsiveness including complaints	Adequate
Assessment and direct work with children and families	Adequate
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
<b>Leadership and management</b>	
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Adequate
User engagement	Adequate
Partnerships	Good
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Adequate

<b>Services for looked after children</b>	
Overall effectiveness	Good
Capacity for improvement	Good
<b>Outcomes for looked after children and care leavers</b>	
Being healthy	Good
Staying safe	Good
Enjoying and achieving	Good
Making a positive contribution	Good
Economic well-being	Good
<b>Quality of provision</b>	Adequate
Service responsiveness	Adequate
Assessment and direct work with children	Good
Case planning, review and recording	Adequate
<b>Leadership and management</b>	Good
Ambition and prioritisation	Good
Evaluation, including performance management, quality assurance and workforce development	Adequate
User engagement	Good
Partnerships	Good
Equality and diversity	Adequate
Value for money	Good