

Inspection of looked after children services

Kent County Council

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Reporting inspector: Helen Cawston HMI

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services to the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line staff and managers, senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, 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
 - a review of 78 case files for children and young people with a range of needs and meeting or speaking to 33 children and young people. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken

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. Kent is a shire county located in the south east of England. It has a total population of just over 1.46 million. According to the 2011 Census 322,743 (22%) are aged 0-17. The age profile shows a similar picture to that of England. However, Kent has a greater proportion of younger people aged 5-19 years. Kent has the largest population of all English counties and over the last ten years the population has grown faster than the national average, increasing 7.8% between 2000 and 2010. This is above the average both for the south east (6.7%) and for England (6.1%). Further forecasts predict an increase of 10.9% between 2010 and 2026. Within the county boundary are 12 district councils and one unitary authority (Medway Council). Parts of Kent share the affluence of the south east of England region and, overall, Kent ranks as the 51st least deprived local authority. However, some areas of the county are amongst the most deprived in the country. While almost three-quarters of the county is rural, most people live in the main 26 towns, the largest of which is the county town, Maidstone.
5. Kent's population is largely of white ethnic origin and the largest ethnic group of looked after children is white British accounting for 83.6%. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 9.4% of the total under 18 population, and represent 16.3% of children in care in the county.
6. The looked after children population has increased by 25% from 1469 to 1831 (as of March 2013), since 2010 and at 56.7 per 10,000 is above that of other regional comparators (52.2). A fluctuation in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) impacts on this figure. If not included in the overall statistics the rate of looked after children per 10,000 is below comparators and the national average of 59.
7. At the time of the inspection there were 1834 looked after children, of whom 192 were UASC. Of the children up to the age of 16, 70.3% were placed with Kent approved foster carers and 17.0% placed with an approved independent fostering agency (IFA).
8. Forty children and young people were placed out of county in residential accommodation.
9. The Catch 22 (16+) service had 748 open cases of children and young people aged 16 to 25 (222 of these were looked after children).
10. The UASC service had 627 open cases of children and young people aged 16 to 25 (140 of these were looked after children.)

Overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people

Grade 3 (Adequate)

11. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people in Kent is adequate. Kent County Council is currently subject to an Intervention notice. The Safeguarding and Looked after Children (SLAC) inspection, in October 2010, judged both safeguarding and looked after children's services to be inadequate. An improvement board was established to support a rapid and sustainable response to the findings. The Kent Safeguarding and Looked after Children Improvement Plan *Putting Children First* sets out the council's improvement agenda and action plan. Refreshed improvement notices from the Department for Education (DFE) have reflected the progress made and established renewed focus on other areas.
12. Tackling a legacy of failures within children's services and the impact that they have on current service delivery remains a significant challenge for the senior management team. The role of elected members, and in particular the lead member for children's services, is providing effective leadership and challenge. The senior leadership team has risen to the task and demonstrates a firm resolve to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. The recent restructuring of services for looked after children into four localities has been carefully considered. This has helped establish a strong foundation on which to build and move the service forward. There are areas of continued improvement with better practice across the service and the local authority partnership. However, there remain too many variables in service delivery that impact on children and young people in receipt of current services.

Capacity to improve

Grade 2 (Good)

13. The capacity to improve services for looked after children and young people in Kent is good.
14. The appointment of a new Corporate Director for Families and Social Care in November 2011 has reinforced the council's determination to progress the improvement agenda. The scale and scope of the improvements required are recognised by the council. There is cross party political support and members demonstrate confidence in the newly established senior management team to move the improvement agenda forward.

However, the council also recognises that the improvement journey needs to continue to bring about long term sustainability and improvement.

15. The strengths of the looked after service are known and understood across the council and by partner agencies. These are consistently being built upon to support a workforce that is now beginning to grow in confidence. Weaknesses in social work practice and service delivery are being addressed successfully albeit starting from a very low base line. Where robust action has been taken to address the failings in service delivery, improvements in outcomes for some children are tangible. For example, the commissioning arrangements with Coram adoption service which is now working in partnership with the council to develop and deliver a newly integrated adoption function. This has led to demonstrable improvements in the council's own adoption service.
16. Significant achievements have been made to improve outcomes for children and young people. For example, the reorganisation of services for looked after children into four locality teams and better collaborative working arrangements with key partner agencies are evident in the progress being made by the council. The council has made a substantial financial investment into services for looked after children despite its widespread budgetary constraints. The development of the Virtual School Kent (VSK) has clearly had an impact on reducing fixed term or permanent exclusions and improving attendance, achievement and attainment. This is evidenced in the educational progress children and young people are now making.
17. Despite substantial strides forward, there remains a significant amount of work to be undertaken by the council to ensure that outcomes for children and young people continue to improve. Stabilizing the work force and building capacity in a very competitive market remains a significant challenge for the council. The workforce strategy *Becoming the Employer of Choice* sets out the council's commitment to ensuring that there is sufficient capacity and capability within the workforce. However, the difficulty in recruiting sufficiently skilled and experienced permanent staff is currently impacting adversely on the council's aspirations to develop and enhance social work practice. Developing robust supervision and case management oversight by front line managers, supported by effective decision making processes, remains critical to the improvement in social work practice. The completion of care proceedings within statutory timescales falls well short of acceptable standards. While work is being undertaken across the partnership to reduce the timescales, significant efforts are still required to ensure that children do not experience significant delay and drift in determining their long term outcomes. Care planning and the quality of assessments remain too variable.
18. A joint commissioning arrangement with the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust has resulted in a recently re-designed Community Child

and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). However, the arrangements are new and have yet to show sustained improvement in enabling looked after children to access services in a timely way.

19. Recruitment campaigns are undertaken to improve the number of in-house foster carers available. Achieving placement stability and permanence for children and young people shows some encouraging signs of improving. However, the difficulties in recruiting foster carers with the right skills and in sufficient numbers to support placement choice impacts on the council's ability to meet placement needs.
20. The number of custodial remands for looked after children, although declining, remains high and the impact of seeking to secure remand foster carers to provide a stable family environment is still in its infancy.
21. Care leavers currently receive an unsatisfactory service, with evidence that some young people are without effective support and involvement from personal advisors.

Areas for improvement

22. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and young people in Kent, the local authority should take the following action.

Immediately:

- improve the quality of supervision and management oversight in casework
- improve the quality of assessments and care planning so that interventions are focused
- ensure that the voice of the child contributes effectively to care planning and service delivery.

Within three months:

- improve looked after children's participation in and ownership of PEPs and Pathway Planning
- increase looked after children's participation in strategic planning by making sure that all young people know and understand the Pledge and contribute to the Children in Care Council, Kentcarestown website and other opportunities for participation
- ensure that all children and young people up to the age of 18 can access the Community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in a timely way
- review the 16+ service to ensure that caseloads are manageable, to enable social workers to carry out effective practice with young people and care leavers
- risk assess all bed and breakfast accommodation to ensure that children and young people are not exposed to unsafe situations
- improve the timeliness of care proceedings.

Within six months:

- ensure that there are sufficient placements available to enable children to be matched to carers that best meet their identified needs and support placement stability.
- ensure there is sufficient and suitable accommodation available for care leavers.
- review the arrangements for the independent reviewing services to ensure that the case loads of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) are manageable.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people

Grade 3 (Adequate)

23. Health outcomes for looked after children and care leavers have improved since the last inspection and are now adequate. Information sharing is improving and is leading to more consistency in health provision for looked after children. Health needs of children who live out of authority are monitored through Virtual School Kent (VSK). This works effectively with looked after children nurses in other authorities to ensure that health assessments are completed in a timely way. Health assessments are audited for quality but it is recognised that further work is needed to improve the quality of these.
24. A new service provider for specialist mental health services for looked after children and care leavers has recently been commissioned and is implementing plans to improve the service across the council. This includes the development of a specific pathway and more flexible referral criteria for those who require the service to ensure that they receive a timely response and intervention. The development plans for the CAMHS receive regular scrutiny from elected members, who have a clear vision for the quality of service provision required. However, access to CAMHS remains variable across the county and some children and young people continue to experience an inconsistent service. Social workers and foster carers report that CAMHS is not always sufficiently responsive and that it is difficult to obtain specialist mental health assessments.
25. There is improving performance in dental checks and review of health assessments. Significant work has taken place to improve the timeliness and take-up of health assessments and initial dental consultations. This has included undertaking visits to the child's placement and telephone consultations. A named looked after children's nurse with specialist skills to support 16+ male UASC living in Millbank assessment centre provides continuity for these young people. However, performance has not yet improved sufficiently for this group of young people.
26. The vast majority of children report that they are leading healthy lives that include exercise and healthy diets and are well supported in achieving good health outcomes. However, assessment, planning and intervention are not always sufficiently focused on the emotional well-being of children.
27. Safeguarding arrangements for looked after children are adequate. There have been some historical, and in some cases long standing delays in securing permanency for some children and young people including in care proceedings. However, action is being taken to address this and there is evidence of some improvement. More effective tracking takes

place of cases that are subject to care proceedings. This is leading to improvements and was apparent on some more recent cases seen by inspectors. For example, a small number of cases are meeting the 26 week timescale for proceedings to be completed. However, this has not yet had sufficient impact on ensuring that timescales set by courts are consistently met.

28. Historically there have been delays for some children entering the care system due to the lack of robust assessment and planning. As a consequence, the council continues to deal with cases where previous interventions have not secured better outcomes for children and long protracted care proceedings remain on-going.
29. Although the stability of the workforce is improving, a significant number of looked after children have frequent changes in social workers. This impacts on the progression of case work and the development of effective relationships. The majority of looked after children seen as part of this inspection were positive about their social workers and feel that they are listened to and seen regularly. A number of children and young people stated that they do not receive sufficient help from their social workers and actions are not consistently followed through.
30. The adoption service has improved and was judged to be adequate at the last inspection in March 2013. The council's partnership with Coram is leading to improved practice and more creative ways of finding families for children. A recent adoption activity day, where potential adopters well advanced in the assessment process met children waiting for matches, is seen as an opportunity to secure more timely placements for children.
31. The number of children being adopted is increasing and the capacity of the service has improved to respond to this. However, challenges remain with regard to some children being placed in a timely way with adoptive parents.
32. Placement choice is limited, which leads to some children not being effectively matched to a placement at an early stage. In particular there are delays in ratifying decisions for children to remain in foster care long term. Only a small number of children were offered a choice of placement. Both the number and type of foster placements are not distributed geographically in relation to current identified need. This represents a significant challenge for the council in meeting its sufficiency duty. An ambitious and targeted recruitment strategy, including for permanent foster carers, is in place to address this. The newly implemented framework for commissioning placements from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) is extending the range of placements available. This is providing a more responsive service in terms of children and young people's disabilities and diversity needs.

33. The fostering service was judged to be adequate at the last inspection in June 2012. Significant work has been undertaken in the council to increase stability for looked after children. Placement Panels consider whether placement moves are in the best interests of children. A more proactive approach to prevent placement breakdown has been established through the placement stability core groups, which work to resolve issues at an early stage. Stability has been affected by some looked after children being matched inappropriately with carers due to previous commissioning arrangements. Placements have now been reviewed in the best interests of looked after children which has led to more appropriate placements. Foster carers report that they receive good support. Most children and young people who responded to the Ofsted survey stated that the care they received was either good or very good. Children and young people spoken to during the inspection were very positive about their foster carers describing them as 'caring and supportive'. Although the vast majority report feeling safe, a very small minority do not feel safe all the time and do not know who to tell if they feel unsafe.
34. Of the six council run children's homes one is outstanding, four are good. One was judged to be inadequate at the last inspection in February 2013. An effective action plan is in place to address the shortfalls in practice identified at the home's recent inspection. A small number of looked after children are still placed out of borough in residential care provision which was judged as inadequate at the last Ofsted inspection. These placements are closely monitored with robust action plans in place.
35. Clear multi-agency strategic arrangements are in place to monitor and improve the response to children who go missing. Improvements are being made in collecting and analysing data across all agencies. Intelligence is shared well between agencies. However, practice is variable. For example, there are delays in strategy discussions taking place and the police do not always participate in strategy discussions. Multi-agency reviews of cases where children continue to go missing are not always timely. Return interviews are undertaken by social workers rather than an independent person who is trained to carry out such interviews. The quality of planning to prevent children going missing is too variable. However, some effective plans have been put in place which have led to the reduction of risk to children and the prevention of further missing episodes.
36. Practice with regard to preventing child sexual exploitation is improving. There is a clear programme of training and increased awareness. Risk assessment processes have been developed and are being rolled out. Data collection and information gathering is being improved. Multi-agency working is also improving. This includes significant work to share intelligence and knowledge and to intervene in cases deemed a lower risk. Links with providers to ensure that they fully understand procedures and identification of risks are not yet sufficiently developed.

37. Educational outcomes for looked after children are adequate. As a result of the development of the Virtual School Kent (VSK) there have been improvements in the achievement of looked after children since the SLAC inspection, in 2010. There is an upward trend in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. More looked after children reach Level 4 in English at the end of Year 6 and gain five A* to C grades in their GCSE examinations, including English and mathematics. However, results in Key Stage 2 mathematics were low in 2012 due to pupils leaving the authority just before the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). Most looked after children make average progress from their starting points and a few make good progress. Support workers from VSK make a strong contribution to pupils' accelerated progress, particularly in primary schools. Designated teachers receive a good range of training especially in how to meet the learning and emotional needs of looked after children.
38. The headteacher of VSK gives good and strong leadership to this service. His determination to give the best possible education to all looked after children has resulted in an effective re-structure and expansion of the staff team. VSK effectively monitors and supports looked after children placed in out of county placements. The headteacher with his senior leadership team provides a good level of challenge to schools. They collect information about all looked after children and hold schools to account for how they meet their learning and emotional needs. The outcome of this is improvements in achievement and attendance and a reduction in the number of looked after children having fixed term or permanent exclusions from school. One headteacher said, 'It is not fair to call it the virtual school because schools get real support from real people when we need this.'
39. VSK has recently introduced an awards ceremony to celebrate the achievements of looked after children. This is very popular and carers and the children greatly value the recognition that this gives to their hard work and commitment to learning.
40. The current quality of PEPs is variable. Targets are not always precise and measurable and do not give children the small steps they need to achieve successfully. Some PEPs only focus on learning targets and miss out physical and emotional development. Looked after children do not always know their PEP targets. Although there are some who know and value these targets well, as one girl said, 'I like to know my targets so I know what to work on.' The recent decision to put personal education plans (PEPs) online, to improve accessibility and the quality, is at a very early stage of development.
41. There are similar weaknesses in pathway plans for older students. Pathway plans are not always specific and do not have measurable outcomes with clear steps for how young people will achieve their goals. In addition there is insufficient involvement and therefore ownership of

these plans by young people. For example, the detailed and comprehensive initial assessments for UASC are not used to create sharp targets with clear steps to success in the pathway plan. Disability needs are not routinely considered in pathway plans.

42. There is improvement in the numbers of looked after children staying in education and training or gaining employment. The council has created a number of apprenticeships specifically for care leavers. There are a good range of further and higher education courses available to care leavers. The good advice and guidance that care leavers get from the CXK career service means that they are able to make informed choices about learning and employment.
43. The support given by the 16+ team to care leavers is unsatisfactory. Care leavers spoken to during the inspection said that they had insufficient support from this team. This was reflected in the pre-inspection survey by some young people. However, the survey undertaken by the council in March 2013 provided a more positive response. Some care leavers state that they have had negative experiences where they have been placed. A range of supported accommodation is available. However, commissioning arrangements are not sufficiently robust to ensure that they meet the range of needs of young people. In addition, young people are not involved in the selection or commissioning of these services. There is insufficient suitable accommodation for care leavers.
44. A number of care leavers stay on in their foster placement when they reach the age of 18. However, the Staying Put initiative has not been strategically led and there is no Staying Put policy to support this. There has been insufficient prioritisation by the council in ensuring that care leavers do not move on to independence before they are ready. Over a third of care leavers who responded to the Ofsted pre inspection survey stated that they did not leave care at the right time. Only half of care leavers who responded to the survey felt that they had sufficient support. However, looked after children; who were spoken to as part of this inspection, stated that they are given help with how to manage their money and are taught basic skills in cooking, cleaning and other vital life skills.
45. Looked after children have taken part in staff selection and give presentations to staff. They are helping to re-write the Children in Care Pledge so that all children and young people can understand what this means for them. They have helped to design a website which provides useful information that looked after children have requested. The voice of children and young people is listened to and taken seriously. However, there has not been a systematic approach to children's participation in influencing policy and practice and therefore children's views have not yet had sufficient impact on service development. Although there are some good examples of participation, the proportion of looked after children

who know and understand the Pledge, have contributed to the Looked after Children Strategy or other key decision making opportunities remains low.

46. Looked after children are given opportunities to take part in leisure activities, including a good range of after school and holiday events. Foster carers receive discounts on all council run leisure facilities. Young people spoken to by inspectors stated that they were well supported in pursuing their interests and gave a wide range of examples of positive activities that they were currently engaged in.
47. Effective work is undertaken by the Youth Offending Service for looked after children and those who are at risk of offending through the Youth Inclusion and Support Panel (YISP). However, offending by looked after children remains higher than the national average and statistical neighbours and they are over-represented in the custodial rates in the county. There is insufficient scrutiny of the profile of these children and young people and no specific strategies in place to monitor and address this situation.
48. The number of complaints from children and young people is increasing. Raising awareness of the process is ensuring more children and young people know how to make a complaint. However, in too many cases the response is not within statutory timescales. Themes from complaints are identified and there is a clear overview of complaints from senior managers. However, organisational learning from complaints is too limited. An effective independent visitor scheme currently supports 48 children. It is recognised that more work could be undertaken to increase referrals so that more children and young people could benefit from the service. Children and young people are accessing the Advocacy service but it is not yet sufficiently accessible for all young people under 16.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (Adequate)

49. The quality of provision is adequate. There have been a number of areas of improvement in the quality of practice provision in services for looked after children in Kent. However, those improvements are not consistent across all services and in some instances service provision remains unsatisfactory.
50. There is a continuing legacy of poor practice, which has only begun to be tackled in the last 12 months. The introduction of Children in Care teams in September 2012 has resulted in a greater focus on the needs of looked after children, including permanency planning and the stability of

placements. Issues of permanency are addressed in planning and there is evidence that the council is now proactive in ensuring that children enter care appropriately, with timely decisions made on care proceedings. There is a high level of vacancies amongst qualified staff in particular areas of Kent and the significant use of agency staff continues to challenge the establishment and progress of good practice. For example, although there has been progress in implementing Public Law Outline timescales, court services report delays caused by changes of social worker and requests for extensions to evidence for final hearings. Foster carers and some children also report concern over changes of social worker.

51. In some cases seen, particularly in the 16+ and care leavers service, some young people have been allowed to drift without effective interventions and planning by social workers. The practice of not allocating a social worker to those care leavers considered to have dis-engaged and holding them on a duty team basis effectively ensures that little proactive work is undertaken. This has resulted in a number of children and young people who have not been seen for several months and who are not in contact with the 16+ service. This practice is as a result of attempts to manage overall case numbers, with caseloads in 16+ teams significantly higher than in children in care teams.
52. Bed and breakfast accommodation is used in a small number of cases, but on a regular basis for 16+ and care leavers and is seen inappropriately by some staff as a suitable placement option. The council has no formal risk assessment in place for using this type of accommodation, although the accommodation officer does undertake regular visits. The council's sufficiency strategy recognises the need to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Providing a choice of accommodation for young people in their transition from foster care to independent living is a challenge for the service. There is on-going work with housing authorities to extend the range of provision. Homeowners are on occasions given access to information about young people, breaching their rights to confidentiality.
53. The UASC service is able to demonstrate considerable knowledge and awareness of different cultural backgrounds but some caseloads are challenging, with assessments and planning not always sufficiently focused on the emotional well-being of these young people. There are effective processes in place to undertake timely age assessments of UASC. Interpreting services are available to assist young people.
54. The Sensory Children and Families team provides support and information for children and young people where there are difficulties related to hearing impairment. Children and young people said the service was good and that support was available to enable them to attend specialist provision to continue with further education.

55. Visits to children are undertaken in accordance with statutory requirements. Some examples of direct work with children by social workers were seen but records do not evidence direct work in many cases. Examples of life storybooks and later life letters to children do not demonstrate an understanding of how to communicate effectively with children. There are examples of inappropriate language being used, for example, siblings for brother and sister and use of professional jargon. While some children and young people are positive about their social workers, a significant number are not. Some stated that there is a lack of building and sustaining of relationships due to changes of social worker.
56. The quality of assessments of need is variable. Some assessments undertaken by referral and assessment services are leading to delays. In a number of cases seen, the thresholds for children and young people entering the care system following a breakdown in family relationships were unclear. Assessments lacked clear evidence of support to the family to parent their child. Some assessments were effective in identifying the needs of looked after children and routinely considered issues of identity, including ethnicity, family background, gender and religion. Parenting assessments include the commissioning of specialist assessments and conclusions and recommendations in cases seen were in line with evidence gathered. Core assessments included relevant information from a range of multi-agency professionals.
57. The quality of assessments however, is not consistent. Some assessments do not take into account all relevant historical information and are overly optimistic about a parent's capacity to deliver good enough parenting. The voice of the child is not always clear within all assessments. This is particularly the case in some assessments of young children where observations are not consistently analysed in order to represent the child's wishes and feelings. Views of parents are not routinely recorded. Assessment templates do not enable managers to demonstrate their managerial oversight. For example, there is no place for the manager to sign the document.
58. Children and young people regularly participate in their reviews and, in a few instances, chair their own reviews. However, a significant number do not attend their reviews and their views are not effectively represented. Though the majority are positive about their experiences and feel listened to, a minority of children have a less positive view. They do not always feel able to participate and state that agreed actions are not always undertaken in a timely way. There are instances where parents and the appropriate professionals are not always invited to reviews because of poor communication between social workers and independent reviewing officers, with less effective reviews as a result. There is little evidence of reviewing officers speaking with children prior to, or between reviews. The officers say that high caseloads prevent this from happening consistently. Children and young people do not always understand contact

arrangements and these are not always sufficiently comprehensive and specific in care planning.

59. There has been an emphasis on the quality assurance of children's plans by independent reviewing officers. Despite this, some plans remain variable and lack both timescales and measurable outcomes. Dispute resolution procedures are embedded in practice and are helping to improve overall performance. As a result, a high percentage of issues and concerns about progress of plans are resolved at team manager level. This includes the effective use of family group conferences to facilitate the finding of alternative carers and the promotion of rehabilitation
60. Social workers report that they receive regular formal supervision and case decisions made in supervision are recorded on the electronic case files. However, records show that supervision is generally task focused and lacks a clear analysis of practice.
61. Social work records are mostly up to date. Many records seen, however, are descriptions of events and are not linked directly to plans and outcomes. In some cases effective managerial oversight is not evident.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (Adequate)

62. Leadership and management arrangements are adequate. Following the SLAC inspection of 2010, the needs of looked after children and care leavers have received renewed focus from the council and its partners to ensure that their role as a corporate parent is effectively achieved.
63. A new Corporate Director for Families and Social Care was appointed in November 2011. Since his appointment, he has established a permanent senior management team and, with support from elected members, has focused on a far-reaching set of service improvements. These have been undertaken in three distinct phases. From remedial action and responding to a service in crisis, to a point where the service is becoming increasingly more stable and able to consolidate the progress made. The pace of change is now gathering momentum to ensure that progress achieved translates into improved and sustainable outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. Staff report that there are better processes in place to support their practice.
64. The Kent Integrated Children's Service Board (KICSB) provides effective scrutiny and challenge to the Corporate Director for Families and Social Care in his designated role as the statutory Director of Children's Services (DCS). The board ensures effective governance arrangements and clear

lines of accountability are in place across a range of children's services responsibilities including social care and education, learning and skills.

65. The DCS and the Lead Member for Children Services (LMCS) meet regularly. They provide effective challenge on a range of children's issues, both through their attendance at the KICSB and more informally at their fortnightly meetings.
66. The vision for the service is articulated well through the Corporate Parenting strategy and the work with the Kent Safeguarding Children Board. Senior managers and elected members work hard to promote the importance of high quality services. This has resulted in a number of significant improvements in the delivery of services to this group of children and young people.
67. A recent restructuring of services provides a dedicated service for looked after children to ensure that they receive properly targeted services from qualified social workers. The aim of achieving permanence has received renewed emphasis, with importance placed on increasing the number and timeliness of adoptions and recruiting foster carers who can offer permanent placements. However, there has been insufficient focus on all issues that impact on the life chances of children and young people. For example, there is insufficient scrutiny of offending by looked after children, and their over-representation in those who receive custodial sentences and the regularity of some young people being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.
68. Performance management systems are now embedded across the service and these are used well at both strategic and operational levels to drive improvements in services. As a result, there has been an improvement in performance in the majority of areas. Having established a performance management culture, the organisation is now seeking to improve the quality assurance of work. Increased auditing and improved management oversight, including a routine system of online audits, has been implemented. Although a positive development, this has yet to become fully embedded and systems to ensure consistency between teams and across the council are not clear.
69. Despite the introduction of a range of strategies, including overseas recruitment and targeted packages to encourage recruitment to specific areas of the county, achieving a suitably trained and experienced permanent workforce remains a challenge. As a result, the council has yet to achieve the target of reducing their reliance on temporary staff to 10% of the workforce. Important information gained by the council as part of exit interviews and seeking to understand why staff remain with the council is under-utilised in considering barriers to successful recruitment and retention. The management of individual performance is undertaken well with a clear system of appraisal to ensure that social workers and

managers are clear about their priorities and the expectations of the organisation. Although talent management is not sufficiently addressed within the workforce strategy, senior managers are increasingly aware of the importance of encouraging and supporting staff to develop their skills within the council. This has resulted in a number of skilled social workers becoming senior practitioners within the service.

70. Despite reductions in budgets across the council, services to looked after children have been protected. Budgetary planning is robust and there is proper scrutiny by elected members. Recent reviews of commissioning arrangements have resulted in improvements in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services to meet the needs of children and young people and obtain best value. As a result, a number of services have been re-commissioned to improve outcomes and achieve best value. Specific services have been commissioned to target areas of underperformance, for example in adoption. An effective partnership with Coram provides support to improve practice and, as a result, the number of adoptions are increasing.
71. The newly implemented framework for commissioning placements from IFA has extended the range of placements available and has reduced the unit costs of placements. Joint commissioning with the Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust has resulted in a recently re-designed CAMHS service with outcomes that should better meet the needs of looked after children. However, some historic commissioning arrangements are in place where services do not meet the needs of the children and young people that they are designed to support.
72. The views of children and young people are gathered in a number of ways including through the 'Our Children and Young People Council'. In addition, VSK employs two care leavers as Participation Apprentices and they, together with a participation worker, organise participation events for children in care on a bi-monthly basis. The council, through the work of the Corporate Parenting Board, is establishing a more coordinated approach to securing the views of looked after children and care leavers to improve service delivery.

Record of main findings

Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity to improve	Good
Outcomes for looked after children and young people	Adequate
Quality of provision	Adequate
Leadership and management	Adequate