

Cumbria County Council

Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

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Children’s services in Cumbria require improvement to be good	
1. Children who need help and protection	Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence	Requires improvement
2.1 Adoption performance	Good
2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance	Good

Executive summary

All local authority services for children have significantly improved and overall effectiveness now requires improvement to be good. This is an achievement, as it follows three inspection ratings of inadequate. Services for children were inadequate for overall effectiveness in 2012 and 2013 because of weaknesses in safeguarding. In 2015, help and protection services had improved, but services for children looked after had declined and were inadequate. The local authority has now achieved a period of continuous development in all services.

The director of children's services (DCS) has worked with senior leaders, including politicians, to drive significant change and improvement across the county. This has ensured that improving services for children has become a priority for the whole council. As a result, the improvements seen in children's services have been part of wider improvement across the partnership in Cumbria.

Senior leaders have improved their understanding and scrutiny of children's services since the last inspection. They act as well-informed and influential corporate parents to drive improvements to services for children looked after. They have a good understanding of the areas of service that need developing and the role they can play in supporting this. They use a range of performance information well to make sure that they understand the quality of services.

The local authority has worked with partners effectively to improve the range and coordination of early help provision. Although step-up and step-down arrangements have improved, the threshold between early help and children's social care is not applied consistently for all children.

Children referred for social work support get a timely response. Strategy meetings lead to effective child protection investigations. The quality of assessments and care plans is improving, but the majority of work still requires improvement. Assessments are not updated often enough and many children do not have a contingency plan in place should their plan not be successful. Significant improvements in use of the public law outline (PLO) and the quality of reports presented to the courts is helping to keep children safe. Children living in private fostering arrangements do not receive a good service because assessments of private foster carers do not evaluate whether the foster carers can meet the needs of the children. When 16- and 17-year-olds present as homeless, not enough have a social work assessment to inform the level of support they require.

Disabled children receive support from different teams across children's services. This is not always effective, and the quality of assessment and care planning is weaker than for other groups of children. When young people need to transfer to adult services for support, planning does not start early enough and this results in uncertainty and delay for some young people and their families.

Children who go missing, or who are at risk of sexual exploitation, are identified and their level of risk assessed in a timely way. For many children, intervention is

coordinated well and risks reduce. When this does not happen, some children have to wait too long before their cases are escalated to higher levels of intervention. Although the response to children who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation has improved, the local authority and wider partnership are aware that further development is required and relevant plans are in place.

Good edge of care services support many children to continue to live safely at home. Decisions for children to become looked after are clear and appropriate. The majority of children looked after have their needs met, both when they are placed locally and at a distance. For some children, insufficient local placements mean that they have additional placement moves. Most children access the best possible schools. The head of the virtual school has good oversight of the education of children looked after, and the quality of personal education plans has improved.

The local authority has undertaken significant work to address the legacy of previously poor permanence planning for children. Large numbers of children in foster care have had their permanence plan agreed and have been matched with long-term foster carers over the last 12 months. There continues to be some delay in suitable matching for some children.

For children who need adoption, the service is good. Timeliness and quality of practice have improved and large numbers of children are being adopted, including those with needs that are more complex. Care leavers are receiving a much better service in some areas of their lives. They regularly meet with their pathway advisers and have access to an increased range of suitable housing options. Pathway plans have improved and young people are clear about their entitlements. However, older care leavers do not receive sufficient support to access and remain in employment, education and training.

Despite the challenge of a large rural local authority area, senior managers are very visible and accessible to staff. Ambitious workforce planning, including enhanced packages for staff and a successful social work academy, has resulted in greater stability in the service, and workloads for all staff have reduced. In addition, good continuous professional development, including leadership and management training and access to postgraduate programmes, is supporting the development of a sustainable workforce. The oversight of casework by frontline managers is not yet consistently effective. All staff now have regular supervision and managers review case files regularly. This confirms compliance with requirements but does not yet ensure that the quality of practice across the county is consistently good.

Senior leaders use regular external evaluation and challenge well to inform plans for improvement. Robust performance management and effective quality assurance systems mean that leaders, managers and staff have a good understanding of services. Senior and political leaders have a strong line of sight and an accurate self-assessment of areas of strength and those that require development.

Contents

Executive summary	2
The local authority	5
Information about this local authority area	5
Summary for children and young people	9
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	10
The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence	15
Leadership, management and governance	24
Information about this inspection	29

The local authority

Information about this local authority area¹

Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates three children's homes. All were judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in May 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
 - Overall effectiveness: Inadequate
 - Children who need help and protection: Requires improvement
 - Children looked after and achieving permanence: Inadequate
 - Adoption performance: Requires improvement
 - Experiences and progress of care leavers: Requires improvement
 - Leadership, management and governance: Inadequate.

Local leadership

- The DCS has been in post permanently since September 2014.
- The chief executive has been in post since March 2017.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has been in post since April 2014.

Children living in this area

- Approximately 92,639 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Cumbria. This is 19% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 16% of the local authority's children are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 11% (the national average is 15%)
 - in secondary schools is 9% (the national average is 14%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 2% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.

¹ The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- The largest minority ethnic group of children and young people in the area is Asian.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 3% (the national average is 21%)
 - in secondary schools is 3% (the national average is 16%).
- Children and young people live in communities that range from dispersed rural settlements and villages to market towns and larger urban areas. 50% of the county's resident 0–19 year olds live in rural areas, compared with 16% of the 0–19 population in England and Wales

Child protection in this area

- At 6 November 2017, 3,079 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 3,104 at 31 March 2017.
- At 6 November 2017, 532 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 57 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 523 children (57 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- At 6 November 2017, nine children lived in privately arranged fostering placements. This is an increase from six at 31 March 2017.
- In the last two years prior to inspection, 11 serious incident notifications have been submitted to Ofsted and six serious case reviews have been completed.
- There are two serious case reviews ongoing at the time of this inspection.

Children looked after in this area

- At 6 November 2017, 627 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 68 per 10,000 children). This is a small increase from 625 (68 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
 - 185 (or 30%) live outside the local authority area
 - 90 live in residential children's homes, of whom 42% live out of the authority area
 - two live in residential special schools², of whom one lives out of the authority area
 - 455 live with foster families, of whom 28% live out of the authority area
 - 35 live with parents, of whom 3% live out of the authority area

² These are residential special schools that look after children for 295 days or less per year.

- five children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
 - there have been 70 adoptions
 - 37 children became subject to special guardianship orders
 - 264 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 6% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 13 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - two children and young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

Recommendations

1. Work with partners to ensure that children supported by early help services are progressed for social work assessment at the right time if their needs increase.
2. Make sure that social workers routinely update assessments to re-evaluate the impact of changes in children's lives and that these lead to detailed plans that also address contingency planning for children.
3. Improve consistency in the quality of social work practice for disabled children, including assessments and care plans.
4. Improve coordination between children's and adult services and health partners to make transition arrangements to adult services timely and effective.
5. When young people present as homeless, make sure that they have their needs assessed by social workers, and that assessments include full consideration of their history and if they need to become looked after by the local authority.
6. Continue to work with the other agencies across the partnership to improve the coordination and service delivery of support to children at risk of sexual exploitation.
7. Ensure that when children move to live with extended family or friends as part of plans to keep them safe, appropriate regulation and case law inform decision-making about the status of the arrangements. This includes undertaking good-quality assessments of connected people when appropriate.
8. Address the lack of sufficiency of foster placements to prevent children experiencing additional placement moves.
9. Initiate an accessible scheme of work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships. Ensure that children looked after and care leavers are given full support to help them take up the opportunities and monitor the effectiveness of them.
10. Ensure that robust oversight of casework by managers leads to good-quality social work practice.

Summary for children and young people

- Services for children and young people in Cumbria are improving, but most still require further improvement to be good.
- Senior leaders know their services well. When they are making changes, they listen to the views of children to inform their plans.
- When children and their families need help, there is a range of services to help them. If professionals become worried about children, social workers work quickly to understand what is happening and make sure that they get help and protection. Sometimes, if things change, they do not change plans quickly enough. If children have a disability or some additional needs, social workers need to start planning earlier for them when they are becoming adults.
- When children go missing or are at risk of being exploited, social workers and other professionals do provide support, but this is not always good enough to make sure that the children are safe.
- If children cannot live with their own families, social workers try to make sure that they live in good-quality foster placements or children's homes. These are often some distance from children's families because there are not enough local placements. This can mean that children have to move again and this causes too much change and uncertainty for them.
- Social workers support children to move back home with their families if this is right, but they do not always record why they think this is a good idea. When they are looking for other family members or friends to care for children, social workers do not assess these people quickly enough to make sure that the situation is safe and right for individual children.
- When a plan for adoption is agreed, it happens quickly and social workers provide lots of support for children and adopters. When the plan is for children to live with foster carers, this decision is not always made as quickly. Care plans are not always clear on what the plan is and how quickly it needs to happen.
- Services for young people leaving care are improving and most care leavers are now in touch with their pathway advisers. Accommodation options have improved and more young people stay with foster carers until they feel ready to leave. More care leavers are engaged in employment, education or training, but not enough support is given to older care leavers to help them to stay engaged.
- When 16- or 17-year-olds are homeless, not enough of them see a social worker before they are given some help. This means that they are not all given information to decide if they need to become looked after.

<p>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</p>	<p>Requires improvement to be good</p>
<p>Summary</p> <p>Services for children in need of help and protection in Cumbria continue to require improvement. Many services have been strengthened since the last inspection, including those for children who go missing, and more children are benefiting from good-quality frontline practice across the county. The quality of practice is not consistently good, with differences remaining across localities.</p> <p>Families are able to access a range of effective early help services. Step-up and step-down arrangements have improved and local early help panels lead to an increased understanding of local need across the partnership. A small number of children receiving support via early help should be the subject of social work assessments at an earlier stage.</p> <p>Children at immediate risk are referred to the duty teams quickly, and action is taken to keep them safe. Children in need of support also receive a timely response, with social workers gathering information and making decisions efficiently before transfer for support by locality teams.</p> <p>Social workers complete assessments within children’s timescales and many evaluate the information and provide strong analysis. Changes for some children do not result in updated assessments and this leads to weaker planning. Children placed with connected carers are not always identified as children looked after, and this results in drift and delay in permanence planning.</p> <p>Work with disabled children is an area for improvement. The quality of assessment and planning is weaker than for other children in the county. Arrangements for transitions to adult services are not effective. As a result, planning takes place too late to meet the needs of children and their families.</p> <p>When children go missing, they are found and referred quickly for support. Return home interviews identify risk, but this does not always translate into proactive planning. When children are at risk of sexual exploitation, risk assessments result in the provision of support. For many children this reduces risk, but for others the support is not well coordinated and, as a result, does not have sufficient impact.</p> <p>Services respond immediately to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and a range of accommodation and support services are provided. Not enough of these young people are referred for social work assessments and, as a result, too few young people become looked after.</p> <p>There has been an increase in the number of children privately fostered. Assessments of private foster carers do not contain sufficient detail or analysis to ensure that the foster carers can meet the needs of children living with them.</p>	

Inspection findings

11. Children and their families are able to access a wide range of early help services that help to prevent the need for further intervention. Increased partnership working has led to further development of the early help offer since the last inspection. New locality-based early help panels are supporting lead professionals with their work. Increasing participation of partner agencies is helping more children to access the right support at the right time. This work has contributed to a significant reduction in re-referrals over the past two years: from 33.4% in March 2015 to 22.1% in March 2017. The discussion of children at the panels helps identify when their situations are not improving fast enough, and cases are then stepped up to social care for assessment.
12. Children's centres provide a good range of services to families with younger children needing early help. The targeted youth service (TYS) provides a range of effective early help provision for older children. A change to the remit of this team means that most of its work is with children and families stepping down from children's social care. Thresholds are applied appropriately for most children and they are getting the right level of support. Some children are transferred from children's social care too soon, before risk to them has been sufficiently reduced.
13. Children who have needs that are more complex or who are at risk are referred appropriately to children's social care via the multi-agency safeguarding hub. Arrangements to manage contacts and referrals are effective. Children at immediate risk are transferred quickly to social work duty teams for child protection work to be undertaken. Other children benefit from work within the hub to gather further information. This ensures that they receive the right support from the right service. Partner agencies actively contribute to this information gathering to allow timely decisions to be made for children. Managers have good oversight of all work within the hub. Decision-making is good, and rationale for decisions is clearly recorded. When children are referred out of hours, the emergency duty team responds appropriately and they efficiently communicate with the safeguarding hub.
14. When children are in need of immediate protection, the majority of strategy discussions are face-to-face meetings and involve all relevant partners. Partners share information effectively and the meetings lead to appropriate and timely decisions and actions. When strategy discussions result in child protection investigations, the investigations happen quickly. Social workers see children alone, and information about families, including historical issues, is well considered. The rationale for managers' decisions is appropriate and well recorded.
15. The vast majority of cases seen during this inspection demonstrated that children who have a social work assessment of their needs receive intervention that improves their outcomes. The use of a recognised social work model is beginning to have an impact by helping social workers consider potential strengths and

risks alongside protective factors for children. Assessments are timely. Many are well written, with good use of historical information to inform analysis. There is not enough information about significant people in some children's lives, such as absent fathers or wider family. Most children's assessments do not explore issues of diversity, culture and identity. Assessments are not updated to capture positive changes, new and emerging risks or significant events in children's lives. As a result, some children's current needs are not fully understood, and their plans do not contain the right support or intervention. (Recommendation)

16. All children have a written plan that outlines what support and services will be provided to help them. Not enough plans state clearly enough what needs to happen and how it will be measured. Actions are not always dated, so progress is difficult to monitor. Plans do not prioritise the most important actions, making it difficult for families to understand what really needs to change. When children move to live with relatives or friends as part of their plan, these moves are not always recognised by the local authority as placements. As a result, some children live in informal arrangements for too long, and they experience uncertainty and delay until the situation is formalised.
17. Children are seen regularly and their views recorded. There is often evidence of direct work taking place with them, but some of this is not meaningful and does not focus on the most important issues for children. The lived experience of children is not clear in all case records and this does not inform the review of these children's plans. All children who are subject to child protection plans are automatically referred to an independent advocacy service. This good practice means that they can get independent support to represent their views. Since April 2017, 37 children have been referred, resulting in 16 accessing support from an advocate, including four children under the age of 10.
18. Disabled children do not receive a consistently good quality of service. Children in need of support are allocated to social workers in the special educational needs and disability teams. The quality of practice in these teams has not improved at the same pace as the rest of the service and the quality of assessment and plans is weaker for many children. Where there are safeguarding concerns for disabled children, this results in co-working with other social work teams. In some localities, this works well, but in others, the service is not well coordinated and leads to a lack of focus on the individual needs of children. (Recommendation)
19. When disabled children are making the transition from children's to adults' services, there is a lack of purposeful planning to ensure that arrangements for their future are in place. Plans for transition are often made too late and the lack of availability of transition workers to participate in care planning causes delays for children and their families. (Recommendation)
20. When children go missing, the local authority and partners work well together to try to keep them safe. Return home interviews are appropriately recorded on children's files. Many interviews do not take place quickly enough, but there is

evidence of persistent work to try to engage children and understand why they go missing. When children keep going missing, a full review of their episodes of going missing and the information known about them takes place. As a result, some children become subject to child protection plans or become children looked after to keep them safe.

21. A range of actions taken since the last inspection include mandatory training and themed audits. This has led to improved levels of awareness across the partnership and an increase in the numbers of children being identified as being at risk of exploitation. There is also greater use of risk assessments to routinely identify and review levels of risk for children.
22. Children at risk of sexual exploitation receive a range of support, and this works well for some children. Risk associated with long-term neglect creating the vulnerability for exploitation is not identified early enough. As a result, some adolescents at risk of exploitation or of going missing are supported by early help services for too long. (Recommendation)
23. The local authority has taken effective action over the last year to improve understanding and awareness of private fostering. Targeted awareness raising has increased notifications, including from international and residential schools. Posters, leaflets and having a named lead in each locality area who has written to every school have increased awareness. The majority of private fostering assessments are completed in a timely way. Children living in private fostering arrangements are visited regularly and seen alone. However, the assessments of carers do not contain sufficient detail or a meaningful analysis of the carers' ability to meet the needs of the child.
24. The local authority and housing agencies have invested well to ensure that there are services in place for 16- and 17-year-old young people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless. Young people are now responded to quickly when they are in need because of revised pathways and protocols. Initial screening of their level of need does not result in enough young people having a social work assessment. There is not enough evidence that young people are advised of their rights and few become children looked after. (Recommendation)
25. Children experiencing high-risk domestic abuse in their home are referred to the county multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC), and benefit from multi-agency information sharing and coordinated plans to reduce risk. There has been significant strategic work to improve the response to domestic abuse over the last 12 months. Despite this, practice is not yet consistently good and the quality of the social work practice in response to domestic abuse varies across the county. The impact of domestic abuse on some children is well understood and they receive services to support them, but the impact on others is not identified well, and plans to support and protect them are not as strong. The local authority is aware of this and plans include the roll-out of a risk assessment tool and further training for all staff.

26. Arrangements to respond to concerns about adults who work with children are effective. A wide range of professionals make referrals, including those from statutory, voluntary and community groups. An efficient system is in place to track and monitor cases. Designated officers oversee progress and confirm that they understand and address any delays.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence

Requires improvement to be good

Summary

Services to children looked after have improved significantly since the last inspection. Children now have care plans and benefit from timely reviews. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) make contact with children regularly and track their progress. Most children have early permanence plans and decisions to take legal action are monitored to prevent drift and delay. Although the quality of all aspects of the service has been enhanced, it not yet consistently good.

Many children are supported to remain at home by strong edge-of-care services. The regular legal gateway meeting (LGM) provides clear oversight of decisions for children coming into care and supports a consistent application of threshold. When children become looked after at the request of their parents, they are not in voluntary care for too long. Children return home when they should, but the rationale for the decision is not always clear on their records.

Reassessment of children’s needs through the review of their care plan is not effective and leads to weak care planning for some children. In addition, too many care plans do not include contingency plans to prevent further delay should arrangements not succeed. Reviews of care plans take place and are timely. Records describe the discussion, but lack detailed analysis of progress by IROs. Children looked after receive effective support from the virtual school team and designated teachers in school. As a result, most children looked after make good progress at school.

Insufficient capacity in the service means that family group conferences are often not used early enough. This can cause delay in identifying potential alternatives for permanence, such as special guardianship or fostering via connected carers. When children are placed with family or friends at short notice, the social workers’ initial assessments of the connected carers are poor.

A lack of foster placements available locally to where children live means that a high number of children looked after are placed away from their communities. This does not affect the service that a vast majority of the children receive. However, the practice of moving some children back inside Cumbria’s borders when a local placement becomes available creates change and disruption in their lives.

Increasing numbers of children with a wide range of needs are successfully placed for adoption. The timeliness of adoption has improved and services to support placements are good. Child permanence reports do not always contain sufficient analysis of why children cannot live with their birth families.

Services to care leavers have improved since the last inspection. This includes increasing the range of housing options available to care leavers. There is still not enough support for care leavers to access work experience or apprenticeships.

Inspection findings

27. Services for children at the edges of care are strong and most who receive these services do not come into care. The dedicated edge-of-care service operates to an established theoretical model. Support includes respite care at a children's home and an outreach service which provides intensive support to vulnerable families. Emotional health and well-being workers and family group conference coordinators also provide good support to children according to an assessment of their needs. Only those children who should be in care are in care. An LGM provides clear decision-making. The meeting has been successful in ensuring that the threshold is consistently applied. This means that children are looked after only when it is necessary.
28. All children looked after have an allocated social worker who knows them well. Social workers seek children's views and clearly record these on their files. Many children also have other professionals in their lives who have regular contact with them and undertake good-quality direct work. This includes effective work by emotional health and well-being workers and personal advisers.
29. When children's outcomes do not improve, referrals to legal gateway meetings ensure that legal action is considered to keep them safe. Managers use the meetings to set timescales and monitor progress of pre-proceedings work to reduce drift and delay for children. Letters before proceedings are not always clear about what needs to change to avoid applications to court. Good support services are provided to families and many children are stepped down from pre-proceedings because of successful intervention following intensive provision of services.
30. Children who are the subject of applications to court experience less drift and delay than they did at the point of the previous inspection. A court proceedings case manager now provides training and mentoring to social workers in addition to monitoring progress of all children's cases. The district judge and Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass) confirm that there has been an improvement in the quality of reports for court. As a result, key decisions regarding children's lives happen without avoidable delay.
31. All children looked after can access an independent advocate. A commissioned service provides advocacy and support to children when they want to make a complaint. Since April 2017, the service has worked with 150 children, including 67 who had not used the service before. Nine children have received support to make complaints in the same period. The service also undertakes independent visits to children's homes, including those homes out of the county in which children from Cumbria are placed. Since April 2017, the advocacy service has seen 28 children during these visits. This service provides good additional support to vulnerable children placed at a distance from their homes.
32. Social workers prepare regular social work reports to update the progress of children as part of their care planning and reviews. These updates do not provide

a full reassessment of children's needs. Significant changes in some children's lives are not analysed and, as a result, these children do not have good-quality care plans. Contingency planning is too often absent from case records. (Recommendation)

33. There has been drift and delay in securing permanence for many children because of historically poor practice. The local authority has undertaken significant work to address this. Eighty-four of the children affected have had their plans presented to a permanence panel during the last 12 months. This has resulted in all of the children having plans for permanence agreed, including 78 children confirmed in long-term foster care.
34. Not enough children have a permanence plan by their second review. Although social workers identify children who need adoption early, some children who need other forms of permanence experience delay. Family group conferences are not held early enough for all children. This contributes to delays in identifying potential alternatives for permanence, such as special guardianship or fostering via connected carers.
35. When the local authority places children with connected carers, most viability assessments are of poor quality. Assessments too often lack analysis of the capacity and ability of proposed carers to meet the needs of the child. The decision to approve the placement is not always timely or clear from the child's case file. Some placements with connected carers are not compliant with regulation. This was not seen to have had an impact on the safety and welfare of children during this inspection. (Recommendation)
36. All children have an allocated IRO who maintains regular oversight of the children's progress and care plans both at, and between, reviews. Caseloads are within the nationally recommended range, in sharp contrast to the high caseloads seen at the last inspection. IROs are more accessible to social workers as they are now district-based and can offer informal advice. This prevents the need to invoke the formal dispute resolution. Records of reviews detail discussions, but they do not include enough analysis of progress or change. Updates to care plans are not clearly set out. Children's views are sought, but purposeful direct work and the use of observations do not always inform reviews as they should.
37. Most children looked after attend the best possible school that will meet their needs, and this provides them with suitable education near to where they are living. Although the quality of personal education plans has improved, too many are still not good enough. Many lack specific targets and contain little evidence of the voice of the child. The head of the virtual school monitors the use of pupil premium funding to make sure that it is providing effective support. This supports most children looked after to make good progress, often from very low starting points. The gap in achievement between children looked after and their peers is still too wide at all key stages. Help is not yet effective enough for either pre-school children or young people over 16.

38. Children looked after attend school regularly, but the number of persistent absences of children looked after has increased. Despite training and strengthened support for schools from dedicated inclusion officers, the number of fixed-term exclusions among children looked after is falling slowly. There have been no permanent exclusions since 2008.
39. The majority of children at risk of child sexual exploitation or of going missing from care were at risk from these issues prior to becoming looked after. Historic poor practice in response to children suffering neglect has led to a cohort of children who have lived in neglectful situations for too long and who have become subject to increased risks as they reach adolescence. Improved recognition and response to children who go missing and who are at risk of sexual exploitation and other associated dangers, such as alcohol and drug misuse, have resulted in many children becoming looked after as older teenagers. The plans put in place have resulted in levels of risk reducing for the vast majority of these children.
40. An active and well-organised children in care council operates three different groups across the county to support the participation of children and young people, which is a challenge in such a large and remote rural area. Effective work with children in care helps them to share their views and shape services. Children are supported to lead reviews of services and present their findings. Children and young people spoken to during this inspection could describe the improvements that their work had made for other children looked after in Cumbria. A good example of this was the more sensitive way in which staff now speak with, and listen to, them.
41. The fostering service produces good-quality, timely assessments of carers. Annual reviews appropriately address carers' strengths, developmental needs and any matching issues. Foster carers acknowledge that the service is improving. They say that they now receive high levels of support and training, and feel that there is greater stability in their contact with children's social workers.
42. An insufficiency of foster placements near to children's communities means that children looked after are often placed at a distance, with some placed outside Cumbria's borders. Procurement of placements from providers outside of the county enables children to be placed when necessary to keep them safe. However, children are then sometimes moved back into Cumbrian provision when a placement nearer to their family becomes available. This reduces security and stability in vulnerable children's lives. (Recommendation)
43. Children placed out of area have the same level of contact with their social workers and IROs as their peers who live within Cumbria. Young people placed out of county who are at risk of going missing or sexual exploitation are routinely offered return home interviews and are subject to risk assessment processes. Placement out of area is a contributory factor to a delay in the delivery of timely initial health assessments. Health partners in Cumbria have not been able to

secure arrangements with their counterparts in other areas to ensure that these take place on time.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good

44. The service for children who need adoption is good. Investment following the last inspection in 2015 has supported significant development in services to children. In contrast to local authorities across England, the numbers of children adopted in Cumbria have continued to increase. Only 13% of children ceasing to be looked after were adopted in 2013–14. This rose to 23% in 2014–15, 25% in 2015–16, and during 2016–17, 32% were adopted (85 children). This is twice the average proportion of other local authorities nationally and reflects the targeted work done by the local authority to address previous poor permanence planning. Although this number will reduce during 2017–18, current data shows that 33 children have been successfully adopted in the first seven months of 2017–18 and a further 21 children are currently placed, but not adopted. This overall sustained improvement is the result of all children being considered for adoption at the earliest possible stage.
45. Every child's permanence plan is now scrutinised by the permanence panel, which also checks that plans for adoption are made concurrently with plans to support families. An adoption lead attends the panel to guarantee that adoption is considered at an early stage for every child. They are also involved in early permanence planning, and provide consultation to social workers in other teams. This ensures that all staff are aware of the children for whom adoption is possible. Plans are focused on children's individual needs and potential matches are identified as early as possible. Decisions about placing brothers and sisters together or apart are informed by suitable assessments.
46. Cumbria is very successful at placing children who have needs that are more complex. Increasing numbers of children are placed for adoption with their brothers and sisters, with 14 sets of brothers and sisters placed during 2016–17. Large numbers of older children are also placed for adoption, with 34 children aged five and over adopted in the last 12 months.
47. The family finding team has increased capacity and managers routinely oversee casework to ensure early identification of children who need adoption. High-quality profiles of children enhance the effective use of regional and national search arrangements, exchange and activity days. Placement of children has also been assisted by an effective commissioning arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency.
48. The timeliness of the progress to adoption has significantly improved and children are now placed in a timely way. It has taken an average of 94 days to get from placement order to matching for the 26 children who have had a plan for adoption in the past year, which is within the national threshold of 121 days.

The average duration from entry to care to adoptive placement for those children who have been placed for adoption is 253 days, which is well below the national threshold of 421 days.

49. Fostering for adoption is a strength and results in children being placed with their adopters at the earliest opportunity. The local authority placed 12 children in foster to adopt placements during 2016–17, with a combination of local authority adopters and additional adopters from a commissioned service. This has helped the timeliness of adoption for these children.
50. The quality of child permanence reports is not consistently strong. Inspectors saw some good examples, but some reports lacked enough analysis to explain why children could not live within their own birth families. To support development, managers have introduced a report checklist, training and quality assurance arrangements to promote consistency.
51. Recruitment of adopters remains a challenge and the local authority uses external providers for a large proportion of its provision. The local authority recognises that this is an area for development and recent use of social media and team attendance at community events have resulted in an increase in inquiries. Recruitment materials thoroughly convey the challenges that potential adopters face, as well as identifying the full range of support offered.
52. Potential adopters receive well-designed and coordinated training during their period of assessment. Timeliness of adoption recruitment has improved. Adopters report that the process is thorough, and helps to prepare them for the future challenges that they may face. Training opportunities continue after adoption, with regular events, in a range of locations, to enable greater attendance.
53. The adoption panel has an experienced chair, a strong panel adviser and is well organised. Panel minutes are of good quality with a clear rationale for the decisions that are made. The chair defers decision-making if reports do not identify all necessary information. This quality assurance function is helping social workers to improve the contents of reports for children and potential adopters. Medical information about birth parents is not always available at a sufficiently early stage to inform adoption planning. For a small number of children, this means that the agency decision-maker and the adoption panel do not have full information at the point of decision-making.
54. The vast majority of assessments of adopters are of a good quality. They contain detailed information and strong analysis to support appropriate matching. In addition to matching on paper, the service uses 'bump into meetings' and 'play dates' to support matching at the right pace.
55. Adopted children and their families have access to well-developed post-adoption support systems. Regular training, support groups and social events take place. In recognition of the needs of children placed for adoption, many of whom are

older children with complex histories, the service provides a range of additional therapeutic support, including work to promote attachments and manage behaviour and enhanced therapeutic life story work. Further additional therapeutic support for families is commissioned to enable access to psychological support and family therapy. As a result, the numbers of adoption disruptions are small in comparison to the volume of children placed, with two in the last two years. The service reviews these disruptions carefully to ensure that learning informs future practice. For example, extra training to improve introduction practice in children's teams is now provided.

56. Life story books seen during the inspection were of consistently good quality. Later life letters are not always written in an appropriate way for an adopted person, with many containing too much professional jargon. Indirect contact for 470 children is facilitated via a well-managed letterbox system.

The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement to be good

Inspection findings

57. The quality of support for care leavers has improved since the last inspection. Almost all young people are seen regularly by, or are in routine contact with, their personal advisers. Where this is not taking place, personal advisers know where young people are and are aware of the young people that the service has not successfully engaged with.
58. Children in care benefit from good early joint work to support transition. Planning for leaving care starts when young people are 15 years old, with effective co-working between social workers and personal advisers. Individual personal advisers lead on specific areas of service, such as accommodation or mental health, and share this expertise across the county.
59. The vast majority of care leavers have an up-to-date pathway plan, although the quality of the majority of written plans requires improvement. Too many have targets that are not specific and only focus on short-term goals. When care leavers face challenges, planning is focused on the immediate issues and does not help young people to consider their long-term futures. The difficulties that care leavers are dealing with are recorded, but it is often not clear what the exact nature of their issues are, or what action is taken to address them. Significant risks are not assessed well for a small number of young people. Risks such as potential exploitation are recorded on file but are not referred to in the pathway plan. It is therefore not clear how these risks will be mitigated or the young person supported to address them. (Recommendation)
60. Through their advisers and up-to-date leaflets for care leavers, young people are now more aware of their entitlements and access them. Work is in progress with

local district councils to expand the range and level of these to include exemption from council tax and free leisure passes. Improved partnerships are initiating applications for benefits at an early stage. All care leavers get a £2000 start-up fund when they move into their own accommodation. They have their passport, national insurance number and can access financial support for driving lessons when they are working or in education.

61. The provision of suitable accommodation for younger care leavers is a strength. Increased numbers of care leavers are staying put with their foster carers (45), using supported lodgings placements (37), or benefiting from outreach support. Very few are in unsuitable accommodation and, of these, the majority are in custody. There is a shortage of housing for care leavers to move on to as they get older and develop the confidence and skills to be more independent. Work is in progress with several partners to widen housing opportunities for older care leavers. Bed and breakfast accommodation is not used for care leavers.
62. Care leavers access their health records, and their advisers support them to become independent health service users. Care leavers are involved in reviewing the way this information is provided to make it more useable. Too many vulnerable care leavers still do not get rapid enough support for mental health issues. Managers recognise this and plan to provide additional support from health and well-being coaches, and additional mental health first aid training for staff to support improvement.
63. The number of 16- to 18-year-olds who are in employment, education or training has increased over the last year, with most young people going to local colleges or staying on in sixth forms. Young people who follow these education routes receive good support from the virtual school team. Young people who go into work or training do not enjoy the same level of support. Too many care leavers over 19 have never engaged in education or training, drop out of education or do not get a job when they finish education or training. Too little is done to address this lack of engagement. Young parents are not encouraged to continue their own development to improve their employment opportunities and the chances of their child, for example through joining maths, English or parenting groups. Around 10% of care leavers (22) are in higher education, with several undertaking masters-level degrees. Although this is above the average for care leavers in England and statistical neighbours, it is still below all young people in Cumbria and has remained static for the last three years.
64. Too few care leavers are in an apprenticeship. Although the local authority offers a guaranteed interview scheme for care leavers for the local authority's apprenticeship scheme, very few are successful. Opportunities to undertake a traineeship in preparation for work are scarce, including with the local authority, and there are very few opportunities for work experience. (Recommendation)
65. The opportunities for feedback from care leavers to influence the service is improving. Care leavers spoken to during inspection have been involved in working with the care leavers' forum and have presented sessions to raise

awareness of mental health issues in their community. There are few other opportunities for care leavers to meet and become involved in activities such as buddying or other peer support. The local authority celebrates the success of care leavers at an annual event and as individual occasions arise.

Leadership, management and governance	Good
<p>Summary</p> <p>The improvements made to the quality of local authority services for children and young people since the last inspection are significant. Leaders, elected members and senior managers in Cumbria have made meaningful changes to the culture of the organisation by focusing on what is best for children and the need for continuous development. They have established effective systems to ensure that they have a realistic understanding of the quality of services for children and their families. As a result, the quality of support, protection and care for children in Cumbria has significantly improved.</p> <p>Performance information and quality assurance arrangements are robust; they consider the quality of practice with children as well as compliance with minimum standards. Practice remains variable across the county, but the overall direction of travel is towards stronger and more child-centred practice. Managers swiftly rectify shortfalls in practice identified through case audits, and practitioners are given feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their practice.</p> <p>Considerable recruitment and retention activity has achieved a more stable and permanent workforce. Although challenges remain, this a noteworthy achievement given the specific challenge of recruiting and retaining staff in a remote rural environment. Staff are increasingly more skilled, have good access to relevant training and their work is underpinned by a recognised model of social work practice. Staff are positive about working for Cumbria and morale continues to improve.</p> <p>Some progress has been made to support particular groups of vulnerable children, including those who require early help, those at risk of sexual exploitation, those who go missing and those experiencing domestic abuse. The local authority recognises that there is more to do to ensure that these arrangements are fully developed and have maximum impact on safeguarding children.</p> <p>The corporate parenting board’s knowledge and influence is now a strength. The county and district councils work together effectively to achieve improved services for children looked after. The board regularly hears from children about their experiences, and this practice continuously shapes the board’s activity and enquiries. Members have in-depth knowledge about children in care and what matters to them. Feedback given directly by children and staff means that all developments are achievable and child-centred. For example, care leavers’ own evaluation found that services for children looked after in 2017 have significantly improved when compared with their findings in 2015. The findings from regular surveys of all children in care shape service developments.</p>	

Inspection findings

66. Ofsted inspections in 2012, 2013 and 2015 found serious and widespread failings in the local authority children's services. Previous inspections described embedded poor performance in terms of practice and management and governance that was indicative of systemic weaknesses. Inspectors did not see these weaknesses during this inspection. Progress recognised in 2015 for children in need of help and protection is now also evident for children looked after.
67. Senior leaders in statutory and other services work well together to address problems and deliver services. The director of children's services (DCS), the chief executive and local political leaders work together to deliver the priorities for children's services. Strategic partnerships such as the health and well-being board, the children's trust and the community safety partnership (Safer Cumbria) work in tandem to progress different issues that impact on children and their families.
68. Communication between the LSCB and children's services is strong, supported by regular meetings between the independent chair and the DCS. The LSCB and the Children's Improvement Board have been key partners in checking that progress is made in children's social care by, for example, scrutinising case audit findings. This has ensured that all external partners are aware of the quality and impact of safeguarding practice in children's social care. Reciprocal arrangements are in place for disseminating the findings of multi-agency thematic case file auditing. Good information sharing has led to a position at which partners understand each other's worlds. They challenge each other, and understand that the purpose is to improve joint provision for vulnerable children.
69. New policies and procedures and centralised management of notifications have strengthened the strategic oversight of children who go missing from home. In some areas of Cumbria, the local authority has worked with partner agencies to develop detailed knowledge and understanding of the risks in that community. Strategic partners are not yet using all the information at their disposal to develop a clear strategic overview of child sexual exploitation and the links to criminal exploitation across all communities in the county.
70. The local authority has responded positively to monitoring visits from Ofsted and the support from the Department for Education (DfE). It has commissioned additional independent reviews of particular service areas. Findings and recommendations from these reviews are integrated well into improvement planning.
71. The DCS models the behaviours and values that he expects to see in his managers as leaders. Historical feedback, including from staff surveys, confirmed that there had been problems with the culture of the organisation and that staff did not feel supported. Recent staff surveys show an improving trend. Many more staff report that morale is good, that they feel valued and, most

importantly, that they feel motivated to do a good job. Staff spoken to during inspection were enthusiastic about working in Cumbria and described good support to help protect and care for vulnerable children. The DCS has overcome the challenge of a large local authority area, some of which is remote and rural, and achieves an impressive line of sight including regular contact with frontline practitioners. This includes conducting individual sessions and undertaking case auditing. He hears directly from children at different events and their views inform action planning and work to develop services.

72. There has been continuous improvement despite considerable changes this year. This includes the local elections in May 2017, a new chief executive in April 2017 and changes to the assistant director role for children's services in both July 2016 and January 2017. Transitions have been managed and communicated well, showing an effective council and strategic partnerships.
73. Since the last inspection, the local authority and its partners have developed a children's trust board, as well as a children and young people's plan that is aligned to a joint strategic needs assessment. The council's priorities include children's priorities. These developments mean that the needs of vulnerable children and their families are high on the agenda of local arrangements. The local authority has engaged well with statutory partners to safeguard children. There is effective liaison and engagement with the senior family judge and other court services. The police have improved their safeguarding work, as confirmed by a recent re-inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, as have health partners. However, a key shortfall remains in the contribution from adult mental health services, which are not sufficiently engaged in delivering integrated support to families in which adults are suffering from mental ill health.
74. Staff from children's services are active members of the health and well-being board and ensure that the board is informed about children's issues. For example, senior leaders have shared information to inform developments in mental health services and domestic abuse services. The proactive involvement of the chief executive and the DCS in developing the new clinical commissioning group arrangements in Cumbria has supported pre-existing plans to continue despite this major organisational change.
75. Elected members carefully scrutinise and oversee services for vulnerable children. They discharge their responsibilities with clear lines of accountability. Both the scrutiny advisory board and the corporate parenting board have a strong focus on vulnerable children. The corporate parenting board, now a fully constituted board of the council, is better informed and considerably more influential than at the time of the last inspection. The board's links with district councils are helping to develop support with housing, leisure and council tax for care leavers. The board hears directly from young people, who influence its priorities. The scrutiny advisory board is well informed of current achievements and deficits; its forward plan is based on emerging priorities.

76. The district-based management structure in children's social care has enabled closer oversight of practice, management and local partnership issues. It supports the improving consistency and quality of practice. Social workers receive regular supervision, although the quality remains variable. Children's case files show evidence of management oversight and guidance. This does not always have sufficient impact and does not yet lead to consistently good quality practice. (Recommendation)
77. The workforce strategy is comprehensive and effective; it covers short-term as well as long-term planning. A variety of measures maximise the local authority's ability to develop, recruit and retain suitable staff. The DfE funding has enabled the development of a teaching partnership with Lancaster University to support recruitment and continuing professional development. The flow of new recruits is steady and the local authority has a third cohort of newly qualified social workers in its academy.
78. Advanced arrangements are in place to increase the skills of experienced workers, for example the offer of a new postgraduate certificate in child protection. Recruitment and retention remain difficult in some parts of the county, but good strategies are in place to minimise staffing shortages and fill vacancies quickly. Workloads for staff are more manageable and caseloads have reduced. The local authority has been successful in attracting external funding for some of its priorities, including workforce development. The determination to enhance practice includes significant investment in a practice model. The application of this model is supporting social workers to undertake more thorough risk assessments.
79. Performance is scrutinised and the local authority has a clear understanding of itself. Performance data is accurate, well presented, and tailored for different audiences, including social work teams. Clear commentaries set out when performance is improving, stable or deteriorating. Reasons for dips in performance are quickly identified and prompt remedial action is taken. The local authority's ambition to improve underpins many indicators that are set locally and are not mandatory. A strong focus on compliance has reduced delays for children. For example, the timeliness of initial child protection conferences was 49.2% in October 2016 but currently stands at 87.5%. There are also sustained improvements in the timeliness of visits to children and in the completion of assessments and reports.
80. Children's case file auditing is a well-embedded and effective aspect of quality assurance arrangements. Audits highlight areas of strength and weakness. The performance board identifies themes and shares these successfully with staff. This ensures that lessons are learned and that practice improves. Findings from the local authority audit activity closely corresponded to inspectors' findings in this inspection.
81. Performance and quality assurance activities combine well to support effective scrutiny of social work practice. The local authority's initial emphasis on ensuring

compliance against minimum standards has delivered improvements. This has developed, with a more recent focus on also improving the quality of practice. Staff could tell inspectors why different aspects of quality practice were important for children. However, some are more skilled than others at applying this understanding. The senior leadership team has an accurate understanding of the current variability in the quality of practice, and its rigorous oversight ensures that progress is maintained.

82. The local authority self-assessment is accurate in its understanding of the vast majority of areas of practice that still require improvement. This includes the response to child at risk of sexual exploitation, children who go missing from home or care, the coordination and delivery of the early help offer, and services for children with complex needs and disabilities. Clear plans are in place to ensure that progress continues across these key areas. The local authority was not aware of the shortfalls in the assessment of potentially homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and those who are privately fostered. (Recommendation)
83. The local authority now hears directly and regularly from children. The views of children in care are sought in a variety of ways and they have good access to advocacy. IROs encourage children to participate and some chair their own reviews. An electronic survey tool that captures children's views at key decision-making points, such as child protection conferences and looked after reviews, is regularly deployed. Findings influence strategic development and service delivery, for example agreeing different ways for young people to be able to stay in contact with workers such as via texting and social media websites. Learning from complaints is methodical and carefully considered; improvement actions are thoroughly tracked to ensure completion.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences that adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the local safeguarding children board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of seven of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted, and two external Ofsted inspectors (OI).

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