

# Suffolk County Council

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 8 April 2019 to 12 April 2019**

**Lead inspector: Margaret Burke**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

| <b>Judgement</b>                                                         | <b>Grade</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families | Outstanding  |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection    | Outstanding  |
| The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers        | Good         |
| Overall effectiveness                                                    | Outstanding  |

Stable and aspirational leadership and strong political and financial support have created conditions that are conducive to continuous improvement and the development of sustainable, high-quality services. Senior leaders have addressed the recommendations of the previous inspection. They have continued to attract new opportunities, develop practice and strengthen partnerships.

Services for children are of an exceptionally high standard. They are child-focused and make a positive difference to children's lives. Workers build positive and purposeful working relationships with children and their families. They ensure that children are safeguarded, and that their wider needs are addressed. They consistently act to ensure the best outcomes for children. Workforce management is also a strength. The ethos of supporting children is reflected in the support offered to staff, with effective training, supervision and opportunities for development.

## What needs to improve

- Strategic planning and performance management in regard to care leavers.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Outstanding

1. Suffolk's early help services have continued to benefit from continuous investments and innovation. Children and their families are served well by an impressive range of early help provision. Skilled, child-centred practitioners work to high standards, providing effective evidence-based support. Staff from these services work closely alongside staff from specialist services. Strong partnership working within early help enables families to access an extensive range of resources across the county. Early intervention in Suffolk is making a positive difference for children and families, reducing risks and harm. This is shown in feedback from parents in local authority surveys, which confirms that early help intervention has improved their family's circumstances.
2. When change is not evident, or risk increases, there is appropriate escalation to a statutory response. The co-location of early help and social care services supports seamless transfer of children's case management between services. Even when work is stepped up to social work services, families will very often continue to receive support from early help services alongside statutory intervention.
3. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is well established. Partners know how and when to refer to children's social care. Those who have concerns about children are given sound professional advice from social workers to help them to decide when to make a referral. When children are referred, thresholds are applied appropriately. MASH managers make good decisions about the appropriate next steps to support children and their families. All high-risk safeguarding concerns are responded to quickly and pass swiftly through the MASH for a social work response within 24 hours of the referral.
4. The introduction of the local authority's new case management system, while successful in other areas, has had a negative impact on the timeliness with which less urgent work in the MASH is progressed. Interim arrangements created additional pressures for staff and resulted in slowing down the workflow. This was exacerbated in recent weeks by staff changes and cover arrangements, which in turn has meant that, in some cases, children presenting with lower risks have been waiting too long in the MASH for a decision regarding follow up and services. Management plans were in place to resolve both workflow and staffing issues, and these had achieved an improvement in timescales. These issues were

completely resolved during the inspection, through a planned upgrade of the case management system and additional action to clear the remaining backlog.

5. Social workers and early help staff produce good-quality assessments that demonstrate professional curiosity, and accurately reflect children's current circumstances and needs. These reports are informed by family history, with appropriate focus on children's needs and the views of multi-agency partners. Effective use is made of research. The authority's strengths-based model of practice is used well, helping professionals focus on key risk and protective factors.
6. Social workers visit children regularly and become reliable people in their lives. They take time to get to know children well and relate to them beyond their initial presenting needs, challenges or disabilities, drawing out and focusing on their strengths. They use direct work and tools effectively to understand what children are thinking of, worry about and hope for. These insights into children's experiences are clearly translated into their assessments and plans.
7. Children's plans are of good quality. They are regularly updated and contain realistic goals, with clear actions to improve outcomes for children. Plans are easy to understand and are routinely shared with parents and children. Staff work effectively with parents, using direct work tools where required, to ensure that they understand the 'bottom line', and what changes need to happen for their children. Plans include details of the additional help that staff make available for families, with an extensive choice of support from early help services, health, education and other community agencies. They set out clearly how these services will work alongside the family and social workers to achieve meaningful change. It is evident that this way of working is leading to sustainable change and making a real difference to the lives of many children, including those in the most challenging circumstances.
8. Children and their parents are supported to attend and to play a meaningful part in child protection conferences, core group and child in need meetings. These meetings make effective use of children's plans to monitor and evaluate progress and to develop further actions with partner agencies alongside children and families. Child protection reviews are timely and effective. Core groups and child in need meetings are not always as timely. However, where there have been gaps, there is evidence of work with children and families continuing with good effect.
9. Changing levels of risk are recognised and dealt with in a dynamic manner, and decisive action is taken where necessary to keep children safe. Children are increasingly benefiting from a direct focus on the impact of neglect, and social workers challenge parents appropriately when progress is too slow. Work is stepped up from child in need to child protection status appropriately. The Public Law Outline (PLO) framework is used effectively to carry out assessments and manage concerns, and, where enough change cannot be achieved for children, court proceedings progress as swiftly as possible. Conversely, when risk

decreases, case responsibility is appropriately stepped down to child in need arrangements or early help, for continued support.

10. Management oversight of work is good. Supervision takes place regularly and is effective in providing critical challenge and clear direction, and in monitoring the progress of work. Time made for reflection is used well. However, the strength of these sessions is not always fully shown in case supervision records. Some records only provide a superficial overview and fail to reflect the wealth of the discussion.
11. The local authority consistently demonstrates, through its range of help and protection services, its commitment to supporting parents to bring up their children safely and successfully. When this is not possible, and children move within extended family networks, social workers remain involved, ensuring that children are fully supported to have long-term placement solutions. Where required, social workers continue their involvement through private proceedings, ensuring that carers can obtain legal responsibility and children have the emotional security and stable care they need. Good support provided by the fostering changes for children team for carers with special guardianship orders ensures that these arrangements are sustainable.
12. Disabled children and young people in receipt of a social work service are very well supported. Social work assessments are thorough and lead to comprehensive multi-agency plans which ensure that the needs of children and young people are fully met. Social workers routinely use tools to build relationships, communicate and ascertain children's views, involving them as far as possible in decisions and plans. They work closely with parents and carers, supporting access to services to ensure that their families are fully supported.
13. Support for families affected by domestic abuse is impressive. In recognition of the high incidence of domestic abuse affecting children, the local authority has worked with partners to establish an effective, integrated response. Repeated successes in attracting external funding have ensured pathways to support for all family members who are affected. These pathways include programmes that work successfully with perpetrators. This whole-family approach works well as the services it draws together focus on children's experiences and understand the impact for them of living in an abusive environment. Support offered to children is successful in reducing trauma, building resilience and strengthening relationships.
14. While cases involving female genital mutilation and honour-based violence present relatively rarely in Suffolk, staff are trained and prepared to deal with these issues and they have helped to raise awareness across health and school partners. The local authority has been involved in supporting a small number of families who were appropriately referred to the MASH. In all cases, there was a proactive response to risk, securing safety arrangements and seeking legal advice to secure protective orders for the child. Support is offered beyond presenting issues, helping to sustain families within the community.

15. The local authority works well with its partners to confront the issues when children are at risk of going missing or are vulnerable to criminal or sexual exploitation or from involvement in gangs. Co-location of teams has been instrumental in supporting good knowledge and understanding of the most vulnerable families. There is effective formal sharing of information between teams, especially where gangs or county lines involvement is an issue. The work of the Make A Change (MAC) and Suffolk Against Gang Exploitation (SAGE) teams to identify and reduce harm from criminal and sexual exploitation and gangs is very impressive. They work well across agency boundaries to share intelligence and to map risks. Through a sensitive and skilled approach, they succeed in engaging with young people to reduce risk of harm. Where children have gone missing, staff make sure that return home interviews (RHI) happen quickly and are of a high standard. Staff use the information children provide well to inform good safety planning. Work is continuing to ensure that all RHIs are timely and of a high standard.
16. The local authority's response to allegations against professionals is robust, and investigations are conducted competently to a high standard.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

17. Children in care and care leavers are supported well by stable teams of highly committed staff, who build trusting and caring relationships with them. This provides opportunities for conversations with their workers about issues they face, and enables assisted access to other specialist advice and support agencies. This has begun to transform the lives of some children.
18. Children become looked after when it is appropriate for them to do so. Since the last inspection, leaders have expanded the scope of the local authority's Stronger Families and Family Solutions services to better support children who are at the edge of care to remain in their families. This means that every effort is made to ensure that children only come into care when other options have been fully considered. Where appropriate, evidence-based practice supports the successful reunification of children in care back into their family networks.
19. Children's assessments are analytical and detailed; they are informed by research, involve children and families and include other professionals' views. They successfully inform care planning, ensuring focus on the most important issues for children. Plans are realistic and time-focused, with independent reviewing officers (IROs) effectively leading reviews and monitoring children's progress.
20. Children are thriving in their placements, many having had very complex and challenging histories. They are supported to pursue interests and are encouraged to follow their dreams. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) being supported to achieve and find purpose in a range of hobbies and

interests. Social workers and carers are sensitive in recognising children's strengths and talents. They have high aspirations for children and they ensure that their achievements are applauded and routinely celebrated. Schemes like the 'grandmentors project' provide children and young people with further opportunities to develop and reach their goals.

21. Children's contact arrangements with their families are well considered and sensitively managed, so that children benefit from safe and supportive interaction with their families.
22. The local authority has effectively established a strong ethos of permanence across the service. Staff recognise that permanence brings with it a greater sense of security for children in care. A comprehensive tracker is in place to manage permanence decision-making, and ensure that children have a timely and secure permanent placement. Service managers regularly discuss exceptions in staff supervision. Independent reviewing officers monitor and provide oversight, also helping to ensure that timely permanence is achieved for children.
23. Commissioning functions have been strengthened, and overall placement choice has improved since the last inspection, with a wide range of good-quality provision to suit the needs of children and young people. However, managers are still struggling to find suitable placements for a very small number of children. Plans are in place to address this, and leaders are monitoring progress closely.
24. Fostering capacity is well managed, with effective recruitment campaigns and engagement with partner agencies. Excellent support services for carers, including two effective mutually supportive networking services, are helping to maintain successful care for children. This has helped the council recruit more foster carers. Suffolk's therapeutic fostering tailored support, provided for carers of children who present with trauma and challenging behaviour, is particularly well received and it also helps to sustain placements. More changes are planned to improve fostering choices for children with high levels of need. There has been a delay in completing some foster carers' annual reviews. Managers are aware of this and are actively working to address it.
25. Adoption is considered for all relevant children. Decision-making about permanence is monitored effectively across the whole service, to ensure that any drift for children is identified and challenged. Children's needs are assessed well, and their histories and complexities are also considered. They are prepared well for transition into their new families. Adopters speak highly of the service, emphasising good relationships with staff, good training, high-quality social work support and the availability of adoption support funding to enable children to thrive.
26. Children in care are supported to provide feedback and help improve the services they receive. Staff encourage them to participate in the well-established C2C and Brighter Futures groups, Suffolk's children in care councils for older and younger children. Ideas from these groups have led to 'top tips' for social workers and

better information given to children in order to ease the experience of coming into care.

27. The virtual school provides good support for and guidance to teachers, and they report positively about the intervention their schools receive. There is an improving pattern in attainment and progress of children in care in Key Stages 1 and 2. This is in part due to the oversight and intense scrutiny by the virtual school, alongside designated teachers of each pupil, of the pupils' needs and vulnerabilities at face-to-face meetings. Attainment at Key Stage 4 remains a challenge, although progress outcome measures indicate that care is having a positive impact on children's progress from their starting points.
28. The help and support that care leavers receive is much better than at the time of the last inspection. The local authority is now in touch with the vast majority of care leavers. It has increased the accommodation options available, and almost all care leavers now living in suitable accommodation, many of them with their former foster carers as part of a staying put arrangement. The ongoing professional support offered as part of the 'staying close' initiative eases some of the stress for young people moving from residential care into semi-independent accommodation. Feedback from young people also points to good improvement to the support they receive.
29. The virtual school works effectively with the leaving care team to provide the best opportunities for children who are preparing to leave care and move on to higher education. As a result, young people's participation in education, employment and training has improved. A growing number of college and work readiness courses support care leavers into positive work experiences. Residential courses have been instrumental in re-engaging the hardest to reach young people who have not been in education, training or employment.
30. Managers and staff work persistently to build and maintain meaningful relationships with care leavers. There is no doubting their passion, commitment and shared sense of responsibility to do the best that they possibly can for care leavers, demonstrating by their actions that they genuinely care about and value the young people. For some care leavers, this has been life-changing.
31. Pathway plan assessments are regularly updated. However, while most care leavers are involved in agreeing their pathway plans, the way the planning template is being completed, with personal advisers being expected to fill in every single section regardless of whether it is immediately relevant, has the potential to undermine the value, meaning and effectiveness of those plans. Co-production remains an ideal rather than a reality.
32. The local offer is comprehensive, detailed and ambitious. Care leavers have access to high-quality information about their rights and entitlements. Every 17-year-old who was due to have a final health assessment in the last six months has had one. All current care leavers have copies of their 'Blue book' health

histories. This is helping to ensure that young people are better equipped to manage the transition to independence.

33. The local authority is making good progress with health, housing and other partners to deliver on the promises made in the local offer for care leavers. However, the current leaving care service development plan is not outcome-focused, sufficiently specific or measurable, and performance management information about young people's experiences and progress is under-developed. These gaps have the potential to undermine accountability and limit the pace of change.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Outstanding**

34. Leaders are ambitious for children and families. They and their staff share a common commitment to continuous improvement, which is demonstrated through the successful implementation of the strengths-based model of practice and new case management system. They have fully addressed the shortfalls identified at the last inspection and have continued to develop and strengthen frontline practice. The work that staff are doing with children and young people is impressive; the way that they are doing it is making a real difference to their lives.
35. Senior leaders have a realistic and accurate understanding of strengths and areas for development. They are open to challenge and are confident in holding each other to account. Governance arrangements are well developed and effective. Strong political and corporate commitment in the shape of significant investment has increased social work capacity and reduced caseloads. This has helped to create an environment in which social work is flourishing.
36. Senior leaders continue to provide a clear strategic lead, working well with partners to transform the experiences and progress of children and families. Co-location of services with, for example, adult services, the police and other key partners, has helped to improve communication, build trust and confidence. This is making it possible to identify shared solutions to common issues and problems. The local authority and its partners have, for example, developed a coherent and robust response to the challenges associated with the criminal and sexual exploitation of children and gangs and county lines.
37. Single and joint commissioning arrangements are strong, effective and responsive to changing needs. The local authority has made considerable progress in implementing its sufficiency strategy. As a result, the vast majority of Suffolk's children in care are living and growing up in Suffolk. Support for foster carers has been strengthened. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds has been eradicated and the number of care leavers who are able to stay put with their former foster carers is increasing.



38. Leaders accept that the inspection findings at the recent local area special educational needs and disabilities inspection visit were disappointing. They had laid firm foundations for services to develop, but acknowledge that communication with parents was not extensive enough and that the pace of progress was too slow. Services for vulnerable children in receipt of social work services are, however, of a much higher standard and they meet children's and their families' needs effectively.
39. Senior leaders have shown considerable creativity and imagination in developing effective workarounds to the problems that Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust are experiencing. The impact of therapeutic and other support available to children whose emotional well-being and mental health have suffered as a result of trauma experienced earlier in their lives is impressive.
40. One of the keys to Suffolk's success is its willingness to embrace purposeful and intelligent innovation. Recent examples include establishing a social impact bond to fund new functional family therapy services and developing positive choices, a service which is working successfully with mothers and fathers who have previously had children removed from their care, to avoid the risk of history repeating itself. These developments are having a positive impact on the children's experience and progress.
41. At the same time, leaders are focused on the fundamentals of practice and on getting the basics right. The quality of assessments and plans has improved significantly. Independent reviewing officers, child protection conference chairs and supervisors are, in most cases, providing the right level of critical challenge.
42. The local authority takes its responsibilities as a corporate parent very seriously. Senior leaders are good at listening to, encouraging and learning from children and young people who rely on their services. Chaired by a very visible and active lead member, the corporate parenting board is working closely with C2C and Brighter Futures to ensure that the local authority and its partners deliver on their public promises to children in care and care leavers. As a result, the influence of children and young people on the design, development and delivery of services is increasing.
43. Senior leaders take decisive action where deficiencies in practice or performance arise. The long-awaited introduction of a new electronic recording system in November 2018, designed to strengthen management oversight, and support frontline practice, has not been without difficulty. During this inspection, while waiting for a new performance dashboard to be implemented, senior leaders acted promptly to relieve pressures at the front door which were impacting on the timeliness of cases being put through the MASH.
44. The local authority makes effective use of performance management information to carefully monitor and evaluate the experiences and progress of children. Reporting arrangements are robust. The new system, and accompanying

software, is already generating a useful suite of monthly reports. Most of the initial teething problems with data quality have been resolved. However, leaders are focusing on further work that they anticipate will be needed in the coming months in order to maintain effective oversight of frontline practice, as they continue to embed the new system and develop performance reports.

45. The local authority's approach to quality assurance is well developed. Senior leaders make good use of themed audits to explore issues of potential concern, to identify whether remedial action is required, and to promote best practice. Learning from serious case reviews is disseminated effectively.
46. Senior leaders have succeeded in creating an environment in which social work is flourishing. The way the local authority has implemented and rolled out its preferred method of social work is exemplary. It is now fully embedded, which means that the local authority and its partners have a shared understanding of, and a common language to describe, risks and protective factors. Parents receive consistent messages about what they need to do to care for their children and what support is available.
47. The local authority has maintained a strong and effective focus on recruitment and retention. New employees are given an effective induction, including time to complete essential training, shadow colleagues and build up their caseloads gradually. Newly qualified social workers undertaking their assessed and supported year in employment talk very positively about their experiences. Staff turnover has reduced, and there is limited need for agency staff. Increased workforce stability means that children and young people are better able to build and maintain meaningful relationships with their social workers.
48. Recognising the importance of relationship-based practice, leaders are good at modelling the behaviour they expect from others. Staff feel and are valued. They appreciate the quality of the training and professional development opportunities, which help them to have the right mix of knowledge and skills to deliver high-quality help and protection, care and support. The results of the latest annual staff survey indicate that job satisfaction is high as staff see the positive contribution they make to the service. Staff take real pride in their work.



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