

# North Somerset

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 2 March 2020 to 13 March 2020**

**Lead inspector: Diane Partridge**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

At the last inspection in 2017, children's services required improvement to be good. A focused visit in March 2019 found weaknesses at the front door, as well as high numbers of children who required an allocated social worker. In addition, performance management arrangements were not helping the local authority to understand sufficiently the quality and impact of its services on children.

While senior leaders have developed plans to address recommendations and areas for improvement. Improvement activity is disjointed and is not always appropriately prioritised. Senior leaders have been successful in stabilising the workforce, and workloads have reduced in many parts of the service. They have still to achieve consistency in the quality of practice across all service areas. Senior leaders have appropriately developed a performance management system, but this does not, systematically and comprehensively inform leaders' understanding of the quality and impact of practice on children.

Children's overall experiences remain too variable, particularly for children in need of help and protection and some care leavers. Managers and social workers are not making consistently good decisions for all children. As a result, some children do not

receive help at the earliest opportunity. However, the experiences and progress of children in care have improved since the last inspection. Children mostly come into care when they should. Childhood trauma, and its impact on the longer-term emotional well-being of children in care, is thoroughly considered. The vast majority of children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs.

## **What needs to improve**

- The effectiveness, and management oversight, of decision-making when children first come to the attention of the local authority.
- The quality of analysis in assessments, including the impact of children's situations on their health and development.
- Management oversight and supervision of the progress of children's plans.
- Formalised matching of children with their long-term carers.
- Access to the drop-in for older children in care and care leavers who are working or who are in full-time education or employment.
- Use of performance management information to systematically inform leaders' understanding of the quality and impact of practice for children.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Requires improvement to be good**

1. Children with emerging needs and vulnerabilities are correctly identified by professionals. Many children and their families benefit from a broad range of local services. Some older children do not have access to this offer as it is primarily delivered through an extended children's centre 'offer'. Early help support, provided by family support workers, makes a positive and enduring difference to the children who receive it. The local authority is aware that its current early help offer can be confusing, is fragmented and is not available to some older children. Suitable and realistic plans are in place to develop services that are suitable for all ages of children.
2. Despite some improvements since the focused visit in March 2019, the front door is not effective for all children. Contacts from professionals are appropriate and demonstrate a clear understanding of thresholds. Improved systems and processes, put in place since the focused visit, have resulted in timely decision-making. The quality of initial decision-making by the front door team remains too variable. Historical context is broadly considered, but not consistently analysed. Therefore, cumulative concerns, and the impact on children, are not always recognised. Not all decisions are sufficiently focused on the risk of harm to children. Consequently, a small number of children remain in situations of unassessed risk, and protective action is not taken soon enough. The local

authority cannot assure itself that initial decisions for all children consistently result in the right response to risk in order to safeguard children's welfare.

3. The 'one front door' response to domestic abuse is an exception to this. Timely and efficient information-sharing between multi-agency partners routinely results in appropriate decisions being made for children who are exposed to domestic abuse. Children and their families receive well-coordinated intervention, which helps and supports them.
4. The designated officer ensures that allegations against those working with children are comprehensively considered. Investigations are thorough and purposeful, and children are effectively protected as a result.
5. In March 2019, inspectors found that a significant number of children in need, including children who were in need of protection or care, did not have a social worker allocated to work with them. As a result, some children experienced delays in receiving purposeful support and intervention to meet their needs. The local authority has taken some action to address this, but the needs of, or the risks to, a small number of children are not understood quickly enough because there continues to be delay in the allocation of social workers.
6. Strategy meetings are a strength. They are attended by a relevant range of multi-agency partners, who reach appropriate decisions for children. This results in child protection enquiries that reduce the risk of harm to the vast majority of children.
7. Assessments are detailed and capture children's wishes and feelings following thoughtful direct work. Assessments describe current issues and summarise worries and strengths well. However, the quality of analysis in assessments is not consistently strong. Children's identities, social context, ethnicity, poverty and family identity are insufficiently explored. Research findings are not used to inform analysis. Assessments are not consistently updated when children's circumstances change. This means that children's day-to-day lives are not adequately understood, and next steps are not always clear.
8. The vast majority of children have a written plan that is reviewed regularly through effective multi-agency meetings. Plans are, however, too variable in quality. Better plans are explicit about expectations, with a mix of tangible and practical actions that support children and their families. Weaker plans lack clarity of purpose and do not include timescales for actions to be achieved within. This can make it difficult for parents to understand what needs to be done in order to improve their children's lives. The new 'one plan' format helpfully sets out what should happen, why it should happen and how, and this helps measure children's progress.
9. When children's situations do not improve, the pre-proceedings element of the public law outline (PLO) is considered swiftly and comprehensively through an

established legal planning meeting process. Pre-proceedings meetings with parents are well managed. Family group conferences are used carefully to identify additional family support in order to strengthen safety planning. These conferences also appropriately consider the wider family network for children who cannot remain safely with their parents.

10. Early recognition of children at risk of exploitation is not consistent, and this leads to some children not receiving help quickly enough. Once risk is known and support is in place, effective multi-agency working by frontline professionals results in appropriate actions being taken to reduce risk. Return home interviews are mostly timely, but the quality is too variable. This means that planning is not always reducing the number of episodes of some children going missing.
11. Children's circumstances and vulnerabilities to homelessness are understood, and decisions to progress to assessment are appropriate. However, there are some delays in progressing assessments and support through Turning the Tide, a team funded through a social impact bond, which provides intensive support to children and families to prevent family breakdown or support children's return home from care. This is a missed opportunity to work with some children and families at a critical time, particularly those who are reluctant to engage with help and support.
12. Children are not always seen quickly enough by a social worker following notification of a private fostering arrangement. Assessments to inform the decision about the suitability of the arrangement are not routinely completed within required timescales. Once suitability of the arrangement is confirmed, children are seen regularly by social workers, and they receive appropriate help and support that meet their needs.
13. Insufficient management oversight of decision-making at the front door means that threshold decisions are too variable. Management oversight and supervision in the community family teams are regular, but they are not always effective. Children's situations and current worries about them are described, but are not consistently analysed, by social workers and their managers. Consequently, management oversight through supervision does not result in clear, timebound actions that progress plans within children's timescales.
14. Disabled children receive services that meet their needs well. This is despite increasing workloads and issues with capacity that are currently being managed effectively. Team leaders use management information and supervision to maintain a detailed oversight of the progress of children's plans. They have also created a positive culture within the team, where children are seen as unique individuals. Social workers display child-centred practice that sensitively responds to children's needs.
15. Leaders ensure that families electing to home educate their children are appropriately identified. They rightly challenge schools to ensure that they are

appropriately supporting parents' decision-making. Leaders use attendance orders effectively when necessary. Although due diligence is undertaken when the initial decision to home educate is taken by families, some families have little contact with professionals after that point. The lack of further contact with such families is a missed opportunity for the local authority to assure itself that the safety and well-being of children not attending school are promoted.

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

16. Decisions for children to come into care are made in their best interests and are largely timely. Cognitive assessments and other specialist assessments are routinely undertaken to inform how to best work with children and their families. These help social workers to make informed decisions about children returning home or remaining in care. Social workers present well-reasoned evidence before the family court for care proceedings. Any delay is purposeful and in the best interests of the child.
17. Turning the Tide workers provide intensive and effective support to help children. They help children to return home when it is safe to do so, and support placement stability for those in care. The team is also reducing the number of older children entering care, meaning that more children are enabled to stay safely within their families.
18. Social workers understand the importance of achieving permanence for children. They ensure that a range of appropriate options, including wider family members and adoption, are simultaneously considered. High-quality assessments inform best-interest decisions about whether brothers and sisters can live together. Written care plans appropriately reflect children's immediate and longer-term needs but do not consistently set out contingency planning.
19. Children's reviews are regular and are led by independent reviewing officers (IROs), who know their children well. They appropriately address all relevant aspects of children's lives. Planning for, and options to achieve, permanence are routinely considered at second reviews. Records of reviews are clear and provide progress of plans. They are written in thoughtful language to the child, reflecting strengths in children's lives while not shying away from difficult messages. Consequently, children are helped to understand important decisions being made about their lives.
20. Social workers are reflective and thoughtful practitioners who develop consistent, positive and proactive relationships with children and their families. Direct work is undertaken with sensitivity and creativity, and social workers and family support workers pay attention to small but highly significant details for children. Visits to children are undertaken at frequencies that are right for the child. Children's voices and views are consistently and considerably captured to ensure that their

wishes and feelings directly influence their plans. When relevant, children have ready access to advocates and independent visitors.

21. Increasingly, children and young people's records are being written directly to them. Many care and pathway plans include direct quotes from children and young people, which give a clear view of their wishes and feelings. This practice is an emerging strength and means that more children and young people are being better helped to understand what is happening and why.
22. Health assessments are routinely undertaken as required, and children's health needs are well considered in their care plans. The therapeutic style and use of trauma-informed practice means that the emotional well-being of individual children is fully considered and tailored, based on their needs. The Consult team provides high-quality intensive support for individual children. It also delivers a range of groups and consultations for social workers and carers, which help to embed the local authority's trauma-informed approach. Support is effective in enabling children to adjust to new care arrangements and deal with early childhood trauma.
23. Young people who attend their final health assessment are provided with a copy of their health history. However, not all care leavers receive this important information.
24. Children in care receive a good level of help and support through the strong partnership working between schools and the virtual school team. Social workers are fully engaged in developing personal education plans, which are then carefully and rigorously quality assured by the experienced virtual school team. There is thoughtful use of pupil premium funding to support children's success in education. Children are well supported to enjoy wide-ranging activities.
25. Children are suitably supported to understand why they are in care and the plans that are being made with, and for, them. Sensitive and enduring life-story work, underpinned by the local authority's trauma-informed approach, helps children to make sense of what is happening for them. Children have long-term plans for their care. However, these are not consistently formalised through an agreed matching process. As a result, not all children benefit from the sense of stability and security that comes with confirmation that they are living in their permanent home.
26. Family time is a strength in North Somerset. It is proactively promoted, and the most complex arrangements are facilitated safely. This includes planned time with previous foster carers who have had significant and enduring relationships with children. Children's wishes are finely balanced with their best interests. For example, when it is appropriate, children are supported to draw up their own safety plan for visits home, which are then distributed to family members and professionals.

27. The local authority consistently makes appropriate needs-led placement decisions, based on what is in the best interests of individual children. The sufficiency strategy and plan appropriately identify that more specialist placements are required to meet the needs of children who have more complex needs. Children placed at a distance are done so appropriately and in placements suitable to their needs. The solutions panel provides effective strategic oversight of residential and high-cost children's placements.
28. The period of handover between children and young people's social workers and personal advisers is very short. This means that young people have little opportunity to build a trusted relationship with their personal adviser at a critical time in their lives.
29. Young people's pathway plans are not sufficiently detailed or specific. They do not clearly address all their identified needs, particularly relating to emotional well-being, and they do not include the young person's views or aspirations sufficiently in order to provide a helpful record that the young person can reference or use in their lives.
30. The local authority is in touch with almost all care leavers. The drop-in centre provides a highly responsive service that is valued by the young people who use it. A generous, inclusive approach means that young people, including those placed by other local authority areas, can benefit from access to support if they live in North Somerset. At the drop-in centre, young people get instant and helpful support at times of crisis. However, those in work or full-time education miss out on this high-quality service because of its limited opening times. These young people would like the offer extended so that it is more accessible for them.
31. Most care leavers live in accommodation that is matched to their needs, and young people are encouraged to stay put with their foster carers. Young people are supported to develop their independent living skills using an effective, structured programme, which is delivered by their personal adviser, using a relationship-based approach. Young people reported that they feel well supported to secure independent tenancies when they are ready for this. They receive consistent help and support to retain their tenancies.
32. Securing strong destinations for care leavers by them staying in education, employment or training is a current challenge for the local authority. Those young people who attend colleges, universities and apprenticeships are well supported by bursaries and resources that are intended to support them and reduce their stress. Some care leavers do not have the consistent support that they need to access and maintain education, employment or training, so their daily lives lack structure and their life chances are reduced.
33. Young people are included in the development of some council initiatives. For example, they have, in partnership with the council, written the care leavers'

guide. This colourful and easy-to-read leaflet sets out the council's comprehensive offer to care leavers and explains their rights and entitlements in clear and accessible language. However, it is not used consistently by personal advisers to promote the offer or re-visited with young people to remind them of their rights and entitlements as their circumstances change.

## **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Requires improvement to be good**

34. Following the last inspection in 2017 and focused visit in March 2019, the local authority appropriately developed action plans to address recommendations and areas for improvement. Although the majority of actions have been signed off as complete, the impact on improving the consistency of practice with, and outcomes for, children is not always apparent.
35. Since the focused visit, leaders have taken appropriate action so that children requiring a social worker are allocated one. The timeliness of decision-making when children first come to the attention of the local authority has also improved. However, senior leaders have not taken sufficient steps to assure themselves of the quality or effectiveness of initial decision-making. Consequently, some children continue to experience an inconsistency of response and do not receive help as soon as possible.
36. Senior leaders are aware of strengths within the services but are not aware of all areas of weaknesses or areas for improvement. There are a number of examples where strategic oversight is underdeveloped. For example, the local problem profile of child exploitation relies too heavily on police information and is not fully informed by multi-agency information. Consequently, strategic leaders are not sufficiently well informed about the risk of exploitation to children living in their area.
37. Senior leaders do not collate sufficient information about children requiring and receiving services from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). The lack of a shared formal process for assurance about the performance of the regional adoption agency for North Somerset children undermines the local authority's ability to commission and improve services to meet local need. Despite this, many children benefit from the help and support they receive.
38. The new framework for performance management is starting to help senior leaders to have an improved overview of key performance indicators, but their over-reliance on performance data and knowledge of individual children, coupled with insufficiently reliable audit findings, means that senior leaders still do not have a comprehensive and systematically informed understanding of the quality of practice or the impact of all of its services on children.



39. Operational managers mitigate some of these weaknesses by raising the standards of social work practice with the use of management information and locally developed improvement plans. This has resulted in some incremental improvements in the service that is delivered by social workers to children and their families, but this is variable across teams.
40. Improvement activity lacks coordination, is disjointed and is not always effectively prioritised. For example, the transformation of early help and the front door has been slow to start.
41. The new political leadership and new chief executive have appropriately prioritised children in the updated corporate plan, and they have also strengthened governance arrangements to better hold the director of children's services (DCS) to account. Children's services have also seen financial investment, mostly to alleviate known pressures. Some areas, such as early help and the fostering service, have received crucial additional investment, but, as this is very recent, impact on improving services is not evident. The multi-agency safeguarding partnership, replacing the North Somerset safeguarding board, is in its infancy, and independent scrutiny arrangements are still to be determined.
42. Corporate parenting is underdeveloped in North Somerset. The newly developed corporate parenting board has only met twice in six months. There has been some time spent inducting new councillors so that they understand their role as a corporate parent. The board has also prioritised the development of a new guide that clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities of corporate parents, but it is too soon to see any tangible impact for children. The board does not include the direct participation of children and young people in its work. The Bright Spots survey provides an effective means of collating the views of children in care. The information gathered has ensured that children's views are appropriately reflected in the updated promise to children in care and care leavers and has informed the refreshed strategic plan.
43. Leaders have been successful in developing and delivering some good-quality services, particularly for children in care and care leavers. These include, for example: the high-quality intensive work undertaken by the consult team to meet children's emotional well-being needs; the drop-in centre, which is highly valued by care leavers who access it; and the implementation of the 'mocking bird' model to support foster carers, which is helping to increase the stability of children's placements. Relationship-based and trauma-informed practice is particularly strong in North Somerset, which means that social workers are mostly confident in their practice and are equipped to support children and families.
44. The local authority has a good relationship with the local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). The courts and Cafcass are positive about the engagement of the local authority and the quality of applications and evidence presented before the court.

45. Senior leaders have strengthened the children's services workforce. Use of agency social workers has reduced significantly, and the stability of those in post has increased. There is an appropriate level of support for newly qualified social workers. The local authority has taken steps so that most social workers have manageable workloads. Social workers reported being happy to work in North Somerset and stated that they feel well supported and valued. They benefit from a broad range of training opportunities.



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