

Inspection of West Northamptonshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 14 October 2022

Lead inspector: Alison Smale, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
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	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

This is the first inspection of West Northamptonshire local authority children's services. West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire unitary authorities came into being on 1 April 2021. Children's services in the predecessor local authority, Northamptonshire County Council, were judged inadequate in 2019. Northamptonshire County Council delegated its children's social care statutory functions and transferred the provision of children's social care services to Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) on 1 November 2020. The trust now delivers children's social care and targeted early help services on behalf of West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire councils. At this stage in the development of the local authorities and NCT, there is little distinction between the quality of provision across the local authority areas.

Children in need of help and protection in West Northamptonshire receive much better support than they did at the time of the inspection in 2019. Early help support has been strengthened, children at risk of harm are identified and timely protective action is taken. Improvements to the quality and impact of social work practice are evident throughout the service, although practice is not yet consistent.

The overall quality of practice for children in care and care leavers has improved since the previous inspection, particularly with regard to adoption, although considerable variability remains.

Leaders have developed and implemented an early help offer, stabilised the workforce, embedded a much more positive culture across the service and caseloads have reduced. This has been achieved against a backdrop of the establishment of the NCT, the creation of two new unitary authorities, a change to the director of children's services and the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders know what needs to be improved and have comprehensive plans in place. Some changes have been too slow, with insufficient progress made in areas such as the response to neglect, exploitation and permanence. Some aspects of practice, such as the use of unregistered children's homes, have not had sufficient senior management oversight.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of how managers support social workers to ensure that assessments and plans are focused on children's experiences and progress.
- The development of clear and effective systems, together with increased management oversight, to improve the overall quality of practice in areas such as the use of unregistered children's homes, children at risk of exploitation and those who go missing from home and care, children who experience chronic neglect and domestic violence, and confirmation of permanence plans for children in care.
- The effectiveness of planning when children come into care.
- The quality of direct work to ascertain children's views about their experiences, and life-story work for all children in care to help them to understand their care history.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Early help has been strengthened and children are identified early when they need help. While there is sometimes a short delay before intervention, children and families benefit from an increasing number of services which, for many, help to improve their lives.
2. Referrals about children in need of help and protection are identified promptly and responded to by staff in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). However, some referrals are not transferred quickly enough to the duty and assessment teams, even when it is immediately evident that a fuller assessment is required. In some instances, when it is less clear if social care involvement is required, more thorough enquiries do not take place and no further action is taken; this contributes to unnecessary re-referrals to the service, when children's needs could have been assessed sooner. Children who are at risk of significant harm benefit from thorough and timely multi-agency child protection strategy meetings. Thresholds are applied well and investigations are undertaken effectively, which result in appropriate actions to safeguard children.

3. Assessments undertaken by the duty and assessment service vary in quality. The high volume of cases in the duty and assessment teams means that too many assessments of children's needs lack sufficient detail to fully understand the experiences of children. As a result, some children are re-referred to the service for the same reasons as in the original referral. Nearly all pre-birth assessments to inform decisions are completed well, providing timely detail which informs next steps. However, assessments for a small number of unborn children could have been completed sooner, avoiding reactive practice following birth and support for babies that is less timely or well matched to their needs.
4. Child in need and child protection plans are of varying quality and most are not sufficiently purposeful or time-specific. They focus on managing presenting risks and needs, and do not give enough attention to the impact of children's experiences over time or to the outcomes to be achieved. Most child protection core group and child in need meetings are held regularly and include key agencies. They focus primarily on the completion of actions and not sufficiently on the impact of services and interventions for children. As a consequence, too many children's plans end prematurely, when agreed actions have been completed but desired outcomes have not always been achieved, particularly for children living in situations of long-term neglect.
5. Work with families at the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline has been strengthened significantly since the last inspection. This work has had a positive impact and enables many children to remain at home safely, avoiding the need for court proceedings and for them to come into care to secure their safety. Tracking of children in pre-proceedings is regular and helps to prevent delays in important decisions. A small number of children, particularly those living in neglectful circumstances, do not enter pre-proceedings soon enough and have remained on a child protection plan for a prolonged period. The trust's strategy on neglect is not yet embedded in practice. Some social workers do not sufficiently understand the complexities of domestic abuse, leading to an inappropriate over-reliance on the parent who is the victim to keep children safe.
6. Children are seen regularly by their social workers and develop positive relationships with them. However, direct work with children is not consistent, meaning that social workers do not always gain sufficient information from children about the impact of their experiences. Some children have experienced too many changes in worker, which has led to some delay in progressing plans for children and families.
7. Practice in the disabled children's team to assess and support disabled children and their families is stronger. Social workers know their children well and use a wide variety of communication styles to gain the child's voice. Senior managers recognise that there are sufficiency challenges which result in delays before some families are given the right support to meet their needs, including transition planning.

8. The initial response by the local authority designated officer is effective, with actions to safeguard children when there are allegations against those in positions of trust. Ongoing monitoring is less effective and multiple recording systems create additional complexity, which results in gaps in tracking allegations. This means that the local authority cannot be assured that actions agreed in longer-term investigations are completed in a timely way. NCT are already aware of the issue and are in the process of changing the recording system for the designated officer.
9. When children are at risk of exploitation, services and systems are fragmented and lack cohesion across agencies to reduce risks, particularly for children at risk of criminal exploitation. This means that professionals in the services do not successfully engage with some children and screening is not integrated, so professionals do not have a full understanding of exploitation risks. The response to children at risk of sexual exploitation is stronger and better coordinated. The response to children who go missing from home and care does not contribute to making children safer. The trust has recently enhanced capacity in the team that provides return home interviews, but the interviews lack depth and fail to elicit the reasons why children go missing.
10. The local authority's oversight of all children who are missing from education and children who are electively home educated is not good enough. Some children have, until recently, been on part-time timetables for too long. Renewed leadership is quickly improving this situation. A high number of children are electively home educated. For some, the safeguarding risks are not routinely considered and key information is not shared between different services, including special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) services and social care.
11. An updated joint housing and social care protocol ensures that most 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless receive a timely and appropriate response to ensure that they are protected.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

12. Most children come into care when it is necessary and appropriate to do so. For most children, particularly very young children, this is planned and timely. Too many children enter care in an emergency as a result of the police using their powers of protection. This means that some children live for too long in neglectful circumstances before coming into care in a crisis. Also, communication between the police and NCT, particularly out of office hours, is sometimes poor. As a result, coming into care can be a traumatic experience for these children, which makes it harder for them to settle.
13. Effective work is undertaken by the family solutions team, which enables some children on the edge of care to remain safely at home. Likewise, this service helps children who are in care to return home when this is in their best

interests. However, in several instances, families are referred to this service after children have returned home, limiting the ability to prepare families at the earliest opportunity and making it more difficult for children to settle back at home with their families.

14. There are delays in securing permanent homes for some children. This includes delays in assessing and securing special guardianship orders, children placed with parents long term and ratification of long-term matches. Senior managers have recently established systems to address this but it is too soon to see a positive impact.
15. Social workers know their children well and endeavour to build trusting relationships through regular visits. Children know that they have a trusted adult with whom they can share their worries and aspirations. Most children in care are not given the opportunity to undertake life-story work, which limits their understanding of their own personal history. However, life-story work is usually done well for children with a plan for adoption.
16. Reviews for children in care are timely and minutes are sensitively written to children. Attendance by children at their own reviews is not consistent. While some children do not attend, and there is no clear explanation for this, others do attend and some chair their own reviews. Social workers provide an update for children's six-monthly reviews. However, these updates do not provide a holistic assessment of the child's needs. The resulting care plans can be formulaic, with a lack of personal focus on achieving permanence, or timescales to bring pace and prioritisation.
17. Overall, children's health needs are understood well. Social workers have worked proactively to reduce delays in health assessments and dental appointments. Senior managers have identified the reasons for delays in health assessments and are taking action to resolve this issue. The child and adolescent mental health service for children in care offers timely responses and guidance when children living in the authority area have mental health difficulties. Despite social workers' best efforts, there are challenges and some delays to accessing mental health assessments and support for children who live outside of the authority area.
18. Staff at the virtual school are ambitious, ensuring that most children in care make good progress at school or other provisions. Most children achieve well in relation to their starting points. However, there are some who do not attend or achieve as well as they might. Most children who access alternative provision are based in poor-quality educational settings. Leaders recognise this and they are developing new strategies to improve this situation. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this work. The proportion of children in care entering full-time education, employment or training is improving as a result of the focused support and guidance that children in care receive.

19. Children in care are supported to take part in a wide range of leisure and social activities. Their talents are promoted and celebrated. As a result, children have fun, make friends, develop a sense of achievement and feel proud of themselves.
20. For older disabled children in care, planning for their transition from receiving support and accommodation from children's services to being supported by adult services starts too late. This results in anxiety for children and their families when they do not know the future arrangements. A new strategy is in place but this has not yet had an impact.
21. Most children in care live in good-quality placements, including specialist provision that meets their needs well. Children in stable foster care homes are cared for, and about. They enjoy all the benefits of family life, including a range of activities and family holidays. Some children with the most complex needs and disabilities continue to experience placement moves and instability while the right placements are identified for them. Ambitious plans are under way to address sufficiency challenges. However, it is too soon to see the impact.
22. A small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. While senior managers quality assure and monitor all these placements and are working with providers to seek registration, leaders accepted during this inspection that their oversight has not been robust enough to be assured that the welfare of every child living in these arrangements is being met.
23. Successful recruitment of additional foster carers has resulted in a small net gain over the last year. Leaders recognise that more need to be recruited. Challenges remain for the fostering service in respect of staffing capacity, resulting in some connected carer assessments being delayed, and a lack of support being provided to foster carers by consistent supervising social workers. Despite this, foster carers report positively about working for the fostering agency and value the additional support available to promote placement stability.
24. Strong adoption work means that children benefit from permanence at the earliest appropriate opportunity, sometimes with foster to adopt carers. Adopters benefit from the support of passionate, knowledgeable and skilled social workers. Adopters reported positively about their preparation and journey to becoming adoptive parents.
25. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported and provided with help in line with their assessed needs. Children are quickly allocated to workers in a dedicated team. Strong Home Office connections enable children to secure timely 'leave to remain' decisions. Children are provided promptly with accommodation and safety plans are quickly completed with children to understand risks and how these will be mitigated. Interpreters are used well and are easily accessible. Children's identity needs are considered, for example by linking them to other children from similar backgrounds and with the

Refugee Council. Children are encouraged and supported to maintain contact with their family while social workers seek legal advice when this is necessary to support children.

26. Personal advisers take time to build relationships with young people who have left care. They often work persistently to address issues and advocate for young people to access services in their efforts to support them. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors described them as 'amazing' and 'brilliant'. Some care leavers have experienced changes in personal advisers, which has affected the quality of their relationship and support. A few care leavers had been introduced to their personal advisers very late, causing anxiety about the transition towards independence.
27. Most care leavers are placed in accommodation that meets their needs. However, before they are allocated permanent accommodation, some care leavers live in temporary accommodation, some of which, they told inspectors, was of poor quality.
28. Care leavers are encouraged to be healthy. Most receive their health histories before leaving care; this is an improvement since the last inspection. Training for personal advisers in emotional coaching is starting to have a positive impact, enabling personal advisers to talk with young people more effectively to understand their well-being. Mental health practitioners are a valued addition to the care leavers' team, but their ability to offer one-to-one intervention has been limited by short-term funding decisions. For some care leavers, the impact of significant trauma in childhood has not been fully considered in plans, and the specialist support that they require is either not put in place soon enough or is ended abruptly. For a very small number of care leavers, this means that their mental health deteriorates to the point that they need in-patient mental health care, which disrupts every aspect of their lives. Continuation of funding was confirmed at the time of the inspection.
29. Support to care leavers who are parents is more variable and there is a limited current offer to develop and support care leavers' parenting skills. Leaders have plans in place to enable personal advisers to offer this support.
30. The response to care leavers who have been unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is mixed. Some continue to be supported well, while for others, intermittent contact via phone or messaging is not sufficient, meaning some of these care leavers struggle to maintain accommodation, education or employment and do not receive sufficient support.
31. Most care leavers are well supported into education, employment or training. They are supported by their personal advisers to maintain their educational placements and to do well at university. Care leavers enjoy a range of activities, such as residential trips, which promote their inclusion. Apprenticeships are starting to be offered but this work is currently underdeveloped. A small number of care leavers work in the care leavers' team, which has provided

them with the opportunity to influence the service as care experienced employees. Most care leavers leave care with bank accounts and the appropriate documentation that they need so that they can establish themselves independently.

32. Care leavers' participation and voices are strong. Care leavers report that the corporate parenting board has listened to their views. Care leavers know about the 'local offer' but it does not take account of rising living costs or include subsidised access to Wi-Fi, which are major challenges for some care leavers. Plans are in place to create a drop-in centre for care leavers and to enhance council tax relief so that it is equitable across the NCT area.
33. While many care leavers do receive support until they are 25, some young people see a formalised assessment when they reach 21, rather than a simple agreement between the personal adviser and the care leaver, as overly bureaucratic.

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

34. Great care and effort are taken by senior managers to visibly support staff and secure a shared vision for improved services for children and young people. Social workers are overwhelmingly positive about working in NCT and children's services in West Northamptonshire, which reflects a significant shift in culture to one of high support and kindness. Although social workers report exceptionally strong support from managers, there is insufficient focus on helping social workers to reflect on the impact of their work or to understand what is changing for children.
35. Leaders have improved services in many aspects and the foundations are now in place to sustain further progress. Improvements include the widespread use of the strengths-based practice model, case recording written to children across much of the service using caring language, a strengths-based quality assurance framework, an improved early help strategy and offer and more manageable caseloads through an increasingly stable workforce. West Northamptonshire and NCT have also embraced learning from other organisations to improve their services.
36. Strengthened governance arrangements are in place through NCT's board and the improvement and safeguarding boards, which provide scrutiny and challenge. Services for vulnerable children now benefit from a stable and experienced senior management team. Compliance with basic practice standards is now in place and provides a foundation on which the further improvements in the quality and consistency of practice can be built. Through the implementation of comprehensive improvement plans, West Northamptonshire with NCT have improved the quality of services for children so that they are no longer inadequate.

37. The newly appointed director of children's services (DCS), who is also the director of adult services in West Northamptonshire, is clear about his role and continues to maintain alignment between the two unitary authorities and NCT to ensure that children receive an equitable service in the authority. The DCS is strengthening strategic leadership through the appointment of a deputy DCS to focus on the quality of practice, but it is too soon to see the impact of this initiative. Effective liaison with North Northamptonshire and NCT enables information-sharing and scrutiny of the work of the trust and provides a forum for ongoing challenge. At this stage in the development of the local authority, with the primary task being to create a more positive culture and improve the quality of services, leaders work closely to enable a cohesive approach which consolidates improvement. Elected members are also kept well informed of progress and challenges. The experienced lead member has provided continuity, having held the portfolio with the predecessor local authority for several years.
38. Although generally comprehensive and effective, gaps in some key areas of performance and quality management systems mean that some pockets of practice have not improved sufficiently since the inspection in 2019. Analytical commentary further strengthens the comprehensive performance reports. Leaders know the service well and are realistic about the scale of the ongoing improvement journey. However, they recognise that there has been some over-optimism on their part about the quality of services for some specific cohorts of children. Plans have not been implemented quickly enough to improve services for children at risk of exploitation and for children in care to achieve confirmation of their permanent homes. Systems in place to manage and oversee the use of unregistered children's homes are not robust enough.
39. Leaders have developed more effective relationships and a stronger shared vision and strategic engagement with partner agencies. Leaders and senior managers are increasingly well respected, and partners recognise the progress that is being achieved. Partners have increased confidence in NCT's services, but this is not always seen operationally, for example, with the regular use of police powers to protect children before they come into care. Leaders have undertaken a review and are addressing this.
40. Corporate parenting arrangements have been strengthened. Members of the corporate parenting panel now appreciate the experiences of children and young people through strong engagement with the children in care and care leavers' councils and dedicated training, which enables a greater level of practice scrutiny. Children and young people are listened to and heard, and actions are taken to improve children's experiences, such as changing the use of language to show children that they are cared about.
41. Active and influential groups exist for children in care and care leavers to contribute to improvements in the trust. The experiences of children, young people and families who use the services are important to leaders in West Northamptonshire and NCT. An up-to-date engagement strategy and

participation framework promotes participation and the feedback is then used to inform service and strategic developments. A strong approach to complaints, informed by children who use services, enables children to make a complaint more easily. It is a credit to the service that the volume of compliments now outweighs negative feedback.

42. Leaders understand the need to develop sufficiency of placements and are proactive in developing the right services for children and families. Forward plans, as well as responsiveness to changes in demand, are creating a much more resilient workforce and range of services to meet levels of need, such as increasing the capacity of social work and leaving care teams. Progress is being made to develop placement capacity through an ambitious sufficiency strategy.
43. Recruitment and retention remain an ongoing challenge and priority. Continued capacity issues in specific areas of the service affect the quality of practice, specifically in the duty and assessment teams and emergency duty teams. Positively, social work vacancies have reduced significantly. Staff development is highly valued and supported through the social work academy, which is helping to stabilise the workforce.

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