

Inspection of Norfolk local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 7 to 18 November 2022

Lead inspector: Margaret Burke, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2017, significant improvements have been made in services for children and their families living in Norfolk. A stable and determined children's senior leadership team, endorsed by councillors, has been innovative, establishing a shared practice culture and new ways of working which have successfully transformed services for children and their families. Children and their families now more consistently receive good-quality services and support.

Leaders have responded positively to the recommendations and areas identified at previous inspections for attention and improvements. They have built on the areas noted in the 2019 focused visit, making further developments in the children's advice and duty services (CADS). Support to children in care has also been strengthened. Norfolk's support to its care leavers demonstrates exemplary practice, securing positive outcomes for many of these young people. The COVID-19 pandemic has not hindered Norfolk's progress; during this time, leaders have continued to develop and enhance their services.

While progress is noted, inspectors identified a few areas of practice which require further attention. Notwithstanding these areas for improvement, leaders have ensured that the vast majority of children, young people and their families in Norfolk receive high-quality, timely and effective support and interventions. Leaders continue to be ambitious and committed to continuous improvements, recognising that there is always still more to do.

What needs to improve?

- The practice response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.
- The recognition of and response to children who are experiencing neglect over a prolonged period of time.
- Decision-making, practice and support to children placed within their family and friends networks, which also ensures that carers are well supported and regulation requirements are consistently met.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. When children and their families require additional help, they benefit from support provided through early help or targeted intervention from area-based family support teams. These services work alongside the people already involved in the lives of children and their families; they support access to other specialist services and provide coordinated support to help make improvements to children's lives.
2. Family support practitioners' casework demonstrates a sound grasp of professional concerns. They use the available tools well to translate these concerns into formats that make it easier for families and children to understand what needs to change. Plans are clear and good progress is generally made before work is appropriately stepped down to other community services or closed.
3. The CADS deliver effective, timely and consistent responses to incoming contacts. Thresholds are well understood and, for the vast majority of children, decision-making is sound. Referrals received are processed within 24 hours of the contact call being made. Parental consent is routinely considered and appropriately dispensed with when there are potential child protection concerns. There is effective use of social care history and information from partners. Social workers in CADS are skilled at identifying the range of risks that children face, both within and outside the home.
4. The emergency duty team (EDT) delivers an effective and responsive out-of-hours service, providing assurance, advice and information to professionals and families who may need this support. Strong relationships with police officers from the multi-agency safeguarding hub support joint working and lead to decisions which are focused on children and their protection. Day services are routinely alerted to all EDT interventions for follow-up.
5. When it is identified that children may be at risk of significant harm, CADS social workers work effectively with their co-located police, health and other partners to support decision-making. Strategy meetings are convened in a timely way. For most children, the meeting is an effective platform for sharing information, analysing risks and assessing the impact on children. The quality of recording of section 47 child protection enquiries is variable, but most contain sufficient information and a rationale for next steps.

6. Assessments are mostly comprehensive. Children are visited at a frequency that meets their needs and work is purposefully conducted to seek their views and wishes. The process of gathering information for assessments is used well to also engage families and build relationships with them to support the process for change. Likewise, assessments for disabled children are regularly updated and provide a sound understanding of the impact of the child's disability on the child and other family members and the support required to meet all the family's needs.
7. Decisions to work within child protection or child in need frameworks are generally appropriate. Children's plans are well supported through regular multi-agency core group or child in need meetings. When it is apparent that parents are not able to prioritise or meet their children's needs, appropriate action is taken to review risks. Social workers routinely seek guidance from their managers to consider options of whether to escalate to a multi-agency child protection conference via the Public Law Outline process or directly to court, taking the appropriate necessary steps to safeguard children.
8. Most children identified as being exposed to domestic abuse receive support that is effective in reducing the risks that they face. Children benefit from safety plans, skilfully developed together with them, accurately reflecting their worries and agreeing the actions needed to help to keep them safe. Specialist support services are provided by a range of agencies and include support to fathers, helping parents make decisions to ensure their own safety while also developing their capacity to meet their children's needs.
9. Family support services actively support children living in situations of neglect. For many children, positive changes are made. But for some, the changes are not successfully sustained after services withdraw, and cycles of neglect continue for these children. Systematic evidence-gathering and use of tools such as the graded care profile in family support services are limited. Consequently, children are sometimes left in these conditions for too long. Once children's experiences of neglect are recognised and support escalated into the child protection arena, stronger work is confidently progressed at a pace that is right for the child. Leaders, including child protection chairs, recognise that this is an area for continuous improvement and have a number of strategies and plans in place to address this. However, these strategies and plans are not yet consistently having a direct impact on outcomes and experiences for children.
10. Children's voices, wishes and feelings shine brightly through case records, especially in case summaries. Skilful and creative direct work is conducted by social workers who help children to understand their situations and say what they believe needs to happen for them to be happier and safer. This is further supported by independent advocates who work alongside these workers. This supports children, including disabled children, to participate actively in meetings about them.
11. When concerns are raised about professionals, the local authority designated officer services provide a timely and effective response. The service ensures

that allegations are tracked, triaged and reviewed effectively. Prompt multi-agency action is taken to reduce the risk to children and is respectful of the rights of all parties. Dashboards are used routinely to maintain oversight of performance and ensure follow-up and resolution before closing.

12. Once children are identified as living in private fostering arrangements, the response is effective. Most children are seen within seven days and initial visits give clarity to carers about their role and the scrutiny involved in these arrangements. The assessments of both the carer and child are strong. Children's views, wishes and feelings are clearly recorded and provide a good understanding of children's experiences. Children continue to be visited by social workers regularly, with annual reviews taking place to ensure that the placement continues to meet the child's needs.
13. Children aged 16 and 17 do not get a consistent or thorough response when they present to services as homeless. Some children, while actively engaged with the authority, were left to find their own accommodation. Other young people were supported to access accommodation, but they were not routinely offered the full range of options, including information which explains the offer of care under section 20 of the Children Act 1989.
14. Children who are at risk of criminal exploitation and involvement with gangs are being identified early in the referral process. Strategy meetings are convened in a timely way to help in understanding the context of risks. Children and their families receive bespoke support packages. These include support from the youth family assessment and safeguarding teams (FAST) and other dedicated professionals. The targeted youth support service (TYSS) also offers additional, relationship-based support to help divert children and young people into safer employment, education or cultural avenues, for example music production, building on their interests. This support is effective and is helping to divert children away from being criminally exploited and reducing the risks to children of being victims of violence. Support is offered to help children to remain safely with their families. Exploitation tools and risk assessments are regularly updated. Performance management arrangements are strong, as are relationships with partners. This has enabled effective positive diversion activities, mapping and the identification of hotspots, and has also led to the disruption of criminal activity.
15. Daily meetings are held by the CADS manager with targeted youth services and the police to consider missing children. The most vulnerable of these children are well known. Specialist missing practitioners skilfully engage with children, building relationships, gathering information about their experiences of going missing as well as their wishes, and promoting positive ambitions. This information is used effectively to plan ways to reduce the risks that these children face.
16. Norfolk has a clearly identified process for managing families in pre-proceedings and in the court remit. Senior management and legal oversight are used well to ensure that resources are made available to support plans for children to remain successfully with their families. Social workers are clear with parents,

including fathers, about what needs to happen to avoid further measures and progress is closely tracked and assessed. This oversight and support have resulted in just under a half of the children in pre-proceedings in the last 18 months being successfully diverted away from court.

17. The elective home education team has deliberately positioned itself to be visible and accessible for queries and to intervene early to prevent children coming off school rolls. Lines of communication are kept open with parents who wish to educate their children at home. The local authority has secure systems for tracking pupils who are removed from school, leave the area or go missing.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: good

18. Children only become looked after when it is clearly in their best interests and there is no other alternative to local authority care. Once children enter care, they are provided with a consistently high level of care and support and are placed with good carers in good-quality homes.
19. Unaccompanied and separated children are well supported when they come into care in Norfolk. Where relevant, safeguarding processes are used to ensure that risks of trafficking, smuggling and modern slavery are minimised. Children are matched to homes, including foster care, that suit their ages or are in line with their preferences, where there are other children who share their identity, culture and language.
20. Exhaustive efforts are made to keep children with their extended family or with friends and, for many children, this is in their best interests. However, when the authority is involved in placing children within their extended family networks, social work practice and recording is not always consistent or robust. The authority inappropriately considers some of these arrangements to be private arrangements. This includes when social workers have brokered or facilitated these placements, when parents are unable to provide suitable care for their children or when children adamantly refuse to return to their parents' care. Some of these children are living with carers who have not been sufficiently assessed, approved or supported as carers. This means the authority cannot be assured that all these children are well cared for and that appropriate safeguards are in place.
21. Children who are accepted as formally in Norfolk's care are provided with exceptional services by compassionate, warm and committed workers and carers. Workers and carers are highly committed to the children they work with and demonstrate real insight into their needs, which are well responded to through a wide range of effective services. Assessment and progress review reports are purposeful, having successfully been combined to capture the events and decisions made for the child during their life in care. These reports are regularly updated, providing rich information for children's future reference about their life in care.

22. Children's plans focus on what is important to them and are provided in formats which help them to understand what is going to happen next and in the longer term, while also providing them with an opportunity to express their views. Disabled children are likewise supported to contribute to their plans and tools are used well to help gain their voice. A consistent team of independent reviewing officers (IROs) keeps themselves well informed and maintains oversight of children's records, seeking to ensure that plans are suitably progressed. IROs are strong advocates for children and demonstrate that they listen to and promote children's wishes and feelings.
23. Planning and decision-making for babies who require early protection constitute a particular strength. Social work practice is supported by clear legal advice. Birth parents are well supported. Where required, babies are placed in carefully matched placements where their development and progress are enhanced as permanence decisions are swiftly progressed. When children are unable to remain with family members, adoption plans are considered early. There is appropriate consideration of placing babies together with brothers or sisters who are already in adoptive placements. For most children, these plans are progressed in a timely manner. However, some children have experienced delay due to court availability.
24. When plans are made for children to return to live with parents, they are subject to thorough, detailed assessments which incorporate the views of other professionals and provide clear evidence on the safety, suitability and sustainability of these plans. Children's views are central to these decisions, which are appropriately reviewed and endorsed by senior managers. Once home with their parents, children continue to be well supported by their social workers and specialist services as they readjust to being with their families.
25. Children are well supported by workers who are tenacious and creative in using a range of tools and theoretical frameworks to help them through significant and traumatic experiences. Inspectors were able to see how this work has helped children to develop socially, accept care from families who show love to them, participate in and enjoy leisure activities and develop friendships.
26. For children where there is a plan for adoption, life-story work is routinely undertaken. Later life letters and life-story books are exceptionally well written, with sensitivity to help children understand their birth identity. This strong practice is further enhanced through seeking additional information and photos from extended family members. Life-story tools are used routinely for children and young people of all ages, through different stages of their care experiences, to help them to understand family relationships and make sense of their histories before and during their periods in care.
27. Children are helped to see people who are important to them. Family time is focused on the needs of children. This includes facilitating and maintaining contact with significant people who live abroad.
28. Norfolk is a protective corporate parent and ensures that steps are taken when children are in vulnerable situations or may be at risk of exploitation or harm.

When children in care go missing or are vulnerable to exploitation, they experience the same high-level response as any other child in Norfolk.

29. There is a coherent and wide-ranging health offer to children and care leavers in Norfolk which spans physical health and mental health needs. Children's health and dental needs are consistently met but the timeliness of assessments has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Children in care are well supported through a tiered offer of support for their emotional and mental health needs. These services continue to be available for care leavers until they are 25. 'Support for Success' services provide additional specialist help to children and young people presenting with complex issues. In addition, a range of other specialist services, for example mental health clinicians, 'New Roads' and targeted youth support services provide additional and alternative channels of support.
30. The virtual school is well regarded by social workers, personal advisers, carers and children's schools. Effective working between the virtual school and children's schools has succeeded in brokering appropriate educational support. Personal education plans are used well and are regularly reviewed to help children and young people to continue to make progress and to maximise opportunities for them to reach their full potential.
31. Children are encouraged to participate in a range of extra-curricular activities and are supported to follow up on areas of interest outside formal education. Importance is placed on children developing hobbies and interests that make them feel good and develop self-esteem.
32. The majority of children live in stable placements that fully meet their needs. Where children experience instability or need to move homes, significant efforts are made with sensitivity to help them to understand the reasons and what services can be accessed to support them and their carers.
33. Permanence planning is well considered. All children who have been in care for more than four months have permanence plans in place which are robustly tracked. When it is in the child's interest, the authority seeks to secure their permanence through special guardianship orders (SGOs). Support to SGO carers is decided on a case-by-case basis; while some children have successfully exited care through SGOs, some foster carers are hesitant about the change, as they are uncertain about the level of ongoing support they will receive.
34. Norfolk has continued to provide strong adoption and support services. Prospective adopters and adopters feel well supported and value the training they receive.
35. Foster carers value the training and support they receive from their supervising social workers. Kinship carers, while also saying that they feel well supported, do not have access to specific training which considers the unique needs of children receiving kinship care. Some foster carers report that they do not feel listened to, valued or respected by senior managers. Part of this frustration centres around planned payment changes due to be fully implemented in 2023

as part of the new deal offer for foster carers. Concerns are centred around fears that payments will be reduced for some carers. Inspectors fed back to senior leaders the views expressed to them through a number of different channels. Senior leaders were aware there was some confusion and told inspectors that no foster carer need be paid less. Leaders committed to reissue communication to carers to provide further assurance about the new model.

36. Personal advisers and social workers have caseloads that enable them to build enduring and effective relationships with their young people and support them into adulthood. Care leavers have the opportunity to get to know their personal adviser from their 16th birthday onwards in preparation for full transfer of support when they are 18. Personal advisers have a sound knowledge of young people's needs and histories; some have worked with their young people for a long time and are committed to keeping in touch with them. Excellent aftercare support is provided to care leavers who are in custody. Care leavers over 21 who request further episodes of support return to the personal adviser or team who know them well. Personal advisers understand the impact of traumatic experiences that young people have faced during their childhood and skilfully work to help them to develop healthy life narratives and build their resilience.
37. Pathway plans are timely and effective. Personal advisers meaningfully involve young people when completing plans, which are written to support young people to understand their progress, as well as identifying needs and risks. The majority of care leavers understand their rights and entitlements and how to access the local offer. Young people are routinely provided with all the key documents that they need to begin their lives as young adults, including their passports, National Insurance numbers and bank accounts. Young people are supported to access funding for help with purchasing the essential things they may need in life. They also have access to locality-based weekly drop-in sessions which allow them to meet with friends and seek advice and support from a range of professionals.
38. Personal advisers and social workers place a strong emphasis on engaging young people in education, employment and training. Personal advisers are ambitious, working closely with the virtual school to support young people to achieve their aspirations. The local authority makes available a range of opportunities to support young people, including apprenticeships and funding for further education.
39. The stability of the life beyond care teams has enabled effective relationships to be built with housing officials. This has contributed to the vast majority of care leavers living in suitable, safe accommodation, including staying put with foster carers. They receive the right levels of support that enable them to develop their independence skills. When young people experience difficulties with housing, personal advisers are strong advocates on their behalf and are mostly successful in re-engaging housing providers to give young people a second chance.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

40. Services and practice in Norfolk have been transformed since the last inspection. Senior leaders, including the council's political leaders, have a good overview of children's services and are committed to a journey of continuous improvement in services for children and their families.
41. Partnerships have been considerably strengthened, informed by Norfolk's children's services strategic framework, known locally as 'FLOURISH', which provides a shared vision and underpins the transformation agenda. This is seen in the innovative system-wide approach to the delivery of services, particularly early help services supported by community and partnership teams. Strong partnerships are also instrumental in the diverse range of multi-agency support services focused on building resilience and ensuring that needs are met quickly and at the lowest level. The strong relationship-based style of working with families is a strength of this authority. This is reflected in the successful development of the CADS, which now enables partners and families to call and speak directly to an experienced social worker for advice.
42. Norfolk's self-assessment is comprehensive and showcases the wealth of different services and support available for vulnerable children and their families across the authority. It demonstrates the ambition of leaders and provides a positive picture of key developments in services and shows that leaders have a sound understanding of their services and have ambitious plans.
43. Leaders could not assure themselves that all 16- and 17-year-olds who presented as homeless were provided with the right advice and the full level of support they required in accordance with statutory guidance. Leaders acted on inspectors' feedback during the inspection and quickly put structures in place to immediately ensure that appropriate support is now made available to this group of young people.
44. When parents are unable to provide appropriate care for their children, leaders do not always ensure that assessments and checks of carers are routinely completed to determine whether placements in extended family networks are of sufficient quality and able to meet children's needs. Consideration is not routinely given to determine whether support is required for children or their carers under section 17 or section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Consequently, not all children and carers living in these arrangements benefit from appropriate levels of scrutiny and support, including financial support, or the long-term planning that other children who are placed away from their parents receive.
45. The timeliness, rigour and recording of assessments of family and friends foster carers was an area highlighted for attention at the last focused visit. While management action has been taken in this area, it has not successfully addressed the identified shortfalls. Assessments of some carers are not completed within regulatory timescales, leaving some children in placements outside of regulation. During the inspection, local authority leaders undertook to review all these placements to ensure that appropriate arrangements are

quickly put in place to make these placements lawful. Additionally, active steps were taken to seek the judiciary's oversight, where relevant, to place them within a lawful framework.

46. Despite these ongoing areas of challenge, it is evident that the vast majority of children in Norfolk receive high-quality services and have good relationships with their social workers, which are leading to continued improvements in their circumstances.
47. The director of children's services (DCS) is recognised internally and across the partnership as an exemplary leader who champions the needs of children and young people. She is well supported by a strong senior management team. Together, they have provided continuity of management and strategic direction. Cafcass and the judiciary speak positively about their relationships with Norfolk and the whole-system way they work together to reduce delays in court proceedings.
48. While there are financial challenges and expectations of savings, there has also been investment in services with a view to savings targets being delivered out of growth initiatives. The council's leaders fully recognise that the impact of savings in children's services can take time to be realised and the DCS has the full backing of political leaders to support service delivery. The investment in the redevelopment of accommodation for children in care and care leavers, increasing in-house provision, is a strong example of this, and is having a positive impact on sufficiency. These successful developments in service provision are testament to leaders' confidence in the DCS's decision-making.
49. The authority is well supported by a range of interactive performance dashboards, data and reports. Performance is discussed in weekly and monthly meetings across different parts of the service at different levels, including case workers. The mantra is that quality and improvement are everyone's business.
50. The quality assurance framework is effective and encourages a full feedback loop, incorporating the views of children. There is a focus on diversity and recording of outcomes on case records. Overwhelmingly, the audit findings are helping the authority to understand and improve practice. Current performance information indicates that practice is good in all areas and improving.
51. Children's participation is encouraged and is a strength of this authority. The Young Adult Forum care leavers' group is an influential and well-coordinated group. The group has been involved in several initiatives that have influenced practice and service delivery through the corporate parenting board. A number of other young people shared their views on services with inspectors and were mostly positive about the support they receive and rightly proud of their involvement in the planning and development of services.
52. There is a clear continual learning culture. Leaders are open to receiving and sharing good practice, including peer challenges and leadership exchanges, with other local areas.
53. Workers are offered a full range of training and development opportunities. Training and practice weeks include a focus on things that matter to children.

Children are routinely involved in planning and these events are well attended. Progression for workers is supported and encouraged. Central to all development is the relationship-based practice model, which is evident and influences every aspect of social work practice. A high level of consistent, strong social work practice across most service areas has been achieved.

54. Workers are well supported by their managers through a range of support mechanisms, including routine weekly group supervision sessions, joint agency group supervision, regular touch-base sessions and advice and information from their managers. Formal one-to-one sessions take place but are not always recorded or held at the frequency outlined in practice expectations.
55. Norfolk has a comprehensive workforce offer and 'deal' which provides additional resources, including administrative support and the promotion of flexible working. Caseloads are balanced and reasonable for most workers, particularly in the in-care teams and life beyond care teams. However, caseloads are much higher for workers in the FAST teams. Here, practitioners work diligently to assess, support and protect children with a range of complex issues but their work is made more manageable by the support they can draw on from the wide range of support services. Practice remains at a consistently high standard in all teams.

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