

Inspection of North Somerset local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 13 to 24 March 2023

Lead inspector: Anna Gravelle, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the last inspection in March 2020, when North Somerset children's services were judged to be requires improvement overall, the local authority has not made sufficient progress and children and their families do not currently experience a consistently good service. The COVID-19 pandemic, restructure of the directorate, increasing need for services and a high rate of staff turnover within both the general workforce and the senior leadership team have all contributed to a pace of improvement that has been too slow for many children. Inspectors did not identify any children at risk of immediate harm.

In some notable areas the impact on the lives of children and families in North Somerset has not been consistently good. Not all areas for improvement have been fully addressed since the last inspection and some positive changes to practice are not embedded. The quality of analysis and assessment of risk for children in need of help and protection and the effectiveness of management oversight and supervision remain areas in need of improvement. The exception is the quality of practice with care experienced young people who receive consistent support and services that meets their needs. Overall, inconsistencies in the quality of practice provided to children are too broad.

An appropriate service-wide plan is in place, aimed at securing the improvements needed. Senior leaders have a strong understanding of the key priorities they need to focus on to improve services across North Somerset. In addition to this, the local authority's relationship-based practice model is becoming more embedded and progressively better understood by staff. A stable and experienced senior leadership team, political and corporate financial backing, increased leadership and management capacity and significantly improved performance management and quality assurance systems are now in place. Although too recent to have supported improvement in all areas, these measures have underpinned recent improvements in the quality and impact of practice and provide the necessary foundations on which a more consistent response for children and their families may be built.

What needs to improve?

- The effectiveness of management oversight and supervision.
- The identification and response to significant and persistent risk to children.
- The frequency and quality of visits to children.
- The timeliness and quality of assessments.
- How well plans and meetings are used to measure and bring about progress for children.
- The timeliness, quality and impact of return home interviews.

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

1. Children referred through Care Connect, the single point of access, to the 'front door' for early help, known as family well-being support in North Somerset, receive an effective and timely response. Children benefit from a comprehensive and effective early help offer. The interface with statutory services is well defined. Some children and their families wait for a few weeks for a service because of increasing levels of need. These families' situations are kept under review and they are provided with alternative support while they wait to ensure an appropriate response should needs increase.
2. Children and their families are helped through an extensive range of early help provision, which reduces the need for statutory intervention. The early help service is making a positive difference for most children and families. However, the quality of early help assessments and plans is not strong for all children because assessments do not always provide a robust understanding of children's lived experiences. When children's needs increase, there is timely escalation to statutory children's services to avoid delay for children.
3. The introduction of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) earlier this year has improved the quality of response for children at the front door. Thresholds for referrals are mostly understood and appropriately applied by staff from

partner agencies. Referrals from police partners do not consistently include sufficient information, which creates delay in responding to risk for children. Partners are working together to strengthen this. Referrals for those children in need of help and protection are mostly responded to effectively. There is appropriate understanding of the risks and the rationale for managers' decision-making is generally clearly recorded. The obtaining and understanding of parental consent are consistently applied within the MASH.

4. A refreshed consultation line has been successfully implemented to give professionals access to confidential support and guidance when there are concerns for children. This service has been well received by professionals and frequent manager oversight of the information is ensuring it is used effectively.
5. Improved information-sharing arrangements are supporting the right decision-making for children. Most multi-agency checks are completed and returned in a timescale that is appropriate to the urgency of children's needs and the level of risk, typically within a maximum of 24 hours. However, for a small number of children, delays in responses and the quality of information from the police are causing some delay in them receiving the right support.
6. The co-location of specialist workers, such as domestic abuse, housing and early help practitioners, enhances the response that children and their families receive. Effective management oversight can be seen at key decision-making points, from information being received to children being progressed through to receiving the right services.
7. The out-of-hours emergency duty team provides an effective and timely response to children in an emergency. Social workers in the team robustly evaluate risks and provide appropriate responses to meet children's needs outside working hours. Information is shared quickly with the front door so that concerns arising for children out of hours are swiftly understood and addressed.
8. When strategy meetings take place, they are held promptly, are mostly well attended, appropriately assess risks for children and generally lead to effective multi-agency plans. Police information is not always thorough enough to inform next steps and hinders robust risk management planning to protect some children. Decisions are mostly proportionate to known risk but do not always provide social workers with specific and timebound actions. For a small number of children, strategy discussions have not taken place when their circumstances suggest that this would have been the appropriate course of action. This has left a small number of children in situations of unassessed risk for several days.
9. Child protection enquiries identify the key concerns and needs for most children and their families. However, for a minority, the assessment of risk is superficial. This is because social workers do not always fully understand or identify key risks for children. Children's past experiences, historical information and

presenting risks are not always considered sufficiently to inform current decision-making and the next steps to reduce harm.

10. While most assessments are promptly allocated from the MASH to the family support and safeguarding teams, for some children there are delays in the timely allocation of assessments due to high staff turnover and limited capacity. In such situations a duty worker is often allocated in the interim to respond to immediate concerns. This can cause delay in building relationships with children and responding to their risks.
11. The quality of social work assessments for children is too variable. Assessments are fairly evenly divided between those that identify children's needs well and those that are less consistent in achieving this. In stronger assessments, historical information is well considered and assessments reflect children's lived experiences well, which helps to inform effective planning. Pre-birth assessments are generally of a consistently higher quality. In weaker examples, children's histories do not inform decision-making sufficiently, including when there are repeated patterns of domestic abuse and neglect. Children's feelings and wishes are not always given due weight in these assessments.
12. Disabled children generally benefit from detailed assessment and robust child in need planning which leads to appropriate packages of support. They have strong relationships with their social workers and their views are captured in their assessments. For some disabled children, the level of visiting is not in line with their needs. Not all disabled children have a contingency plan should they need to be cared for in an emergency or if their needs escalate.
13. Initial child protection conferences are timely and appropriate to children's level of risk. Children attend some conferences, but independent advocacy services are not used to their full potential. Broadly the right information is contained in children's plans, in both child in need and child protection plans. In common with the quality of assessments, the use of plans to drive and monitor progress is inconsistent. In weaker plans, areas that need to be improved for children are not highlighted strongly enough and actions are not always measurable to help prevent drift for children. Contingency planning is mostly lacking and does not help parents to understand next steps should risks escalate.
14. Child protection core groups are not routinely held in a timely way for all children. When they are held, meetings are not consistently supporting progress for children for whom there are chronic and repeat concerns such as neglect and domestic abuse. The cumulative impact on children of living in such circumstances is not always recognised by workers. Child protection chairs are inconsistent in escalating concerns. They do not routinely have contact with children or an up-to-date overview of children's circumstances between conferences. Child in need reviews mostly take place but are not always effective in leading progress for children.

15. While most children are seen regularly, some are not being visited as frequently as they should in line with their needs and presenting risks. When children are seen, they are not always seen alone, and the quality of the intervention and the recording is variable. A small number of children have significant gaps in receiving visits. For a small proportion of these vulnerable children there is an overdependence on schools and on occasion the police, to monitor their safety and well-being. This often results in a lack of progress for these children and ineffective child protection planning. Visits are timelier for children in need, mostly reflect their needs and are used positively to build relationships.
16. Supervision for social workers is variable in terms of the timeliness and the quality. Management oversight is evident on children's records but the quality is weak and is not having a sufficient impact for children. Some newly qualified social workers are not being provided with regular and good-quality supervision to help them develop and are managing complex work with children.
17. There are effective arrangements in place to track and monitor children who are subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Recently introduced monthly tracking meetings ensure that senior leaders have effective oversight of children's progress, including of a significant number of children diverted from care proceedings. Letters to parents before action are clear and identify key issues well.
18. When children are at risk of extra-familial harm, including criminal or sexual exploitation, responses are generally effective. These responses are, however, largely individualised and the local authority and partner agencies currently do not have a joined-up approach to the identification of overlapping risks, links between children at risk and a systematic approach to prevention and disruption. The local authority's leaders are aware that more work is needed, and they have realistic plans in place to strengthen the quality and impact of work for these children.
19. When children go missing, immediate responses are generally timely and effective. This is supported by appropriate information-sharing between the local authority and police. Weekly missing meetings ensure that children who have been missing are discussed and considered and decisions in respect of risk and support are made. While almost all children who go missing are offered a return home interview (RHI) and just over half take up the offer, a declining number of children receive their interview within 72 hours. This prevents children from talking about their experiences quickly and can delay support. In addition, information recorded in RHIs is often limited, not written up in a timely way after interviews are conducted and not always copied into children's electronic case files. This limits the effectiveness of information from interviews being used to reduce the likelihood of children going missing again.
20. For those children missing education, the local authority has intervention plans in place to track the reasons behind this, including demonstrating what support

has been offered. Plans to support children and young people back into full-time education are in place for most pupils. Arrangements to identify safeguarding concerns for electively home educated children are weak, predominantly due to prolonged limited staffing capacity. Arrangements are now in place to strengthen capacity and the oversight of these children.

21. The local authority designated officer (LADO) has effective oversight in monitoring and tracking the timeliness of referrals. Arrangements have recently changed and the role is shared between a number independent reviewing officers (IROs). The quality of response to allegations is variable and the impact of this new arrangement is yet to be seen. The LADO team provides advice and support when requested. However, the LADO team does not always identify and challenge weaker practice.
22. A very small number of children live in private fostering arrangements in North Somerset and much work has been done to raise awareness in local communities. Children in private fostering arrangements receive robust assessment from social workers who understand their needs. Children's views are captured through frequent visiting to assess risk and develop appropriate support plans.
23. Children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless or at risk of being homeless generally receive an immediate and effective multi-agency response. Children benefit from strong assessments that support them to remain with their families or are provided with accommodation when necessary. Children are verbally informed of their rights and entitlements but are not provided with information in a child-friendly format, in line with good practice guidance, to ensure they understand their rights.

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

24. Decisions to bring children into care are well matched to children's levels of need and risk. For some children, particularly those living in homes with chronic neglect or longstanding domestic abuse, entry to care does not always come as quickly as it could. Assessments shared with the courts are generally strong and proceedings are increasingly timely.
25. Most children live in stable homes with carers who meet their needs. Children who return home to live with their parents are supported with clear plans for a gradual transition home, with appropriate support packages and increased visiting levels to check on their welfare.
26. Children's reviews are generally, but not always, timely and the local authority is not making best use of its commissioned advocacy service for children to strengthen their voice. Nonetheless, children are often present at their reviews and are well supported to participate by social workers and IROs.

27. Children's care plans generally contain actions that are matched to their needs but they are not always up to date or sufficiently specific about actions and often lack target dates for completion. Minutes are not always distributed in a timely manner after reviews. This makes it harder to track and to drive progress for children. In addition, although IROs do track progress between reviews when there are significant issues to follow up, this is not routinely done and is a reactive rather than a proactive approach that limits IROs' ability to grasp how well actions are being progressed for all children.
28. Although children are mostly seen within statutory timescales, this is not always the case. The frequency with which children are visited and are seen on their own has declined in recent months. This is not always sufficiently reflected in the records of home visits, and the quality and frequency of manager oversight and supervision are not consistently effective. Visits do not always increase in frequency when children's needs escalate. Too many visits are undertaken in schools or remotely; this make it harder to understand how well children are doing in their homes and with their carers. Similarly, when direct work is undertaken with children, this is often sensitive and well-focused but currently too few children are benefiting from this. The number of return home interviews completed within 72 hours is particularly low for children in care. For some of the more vulnerable children at risk of exploitation, when their needs are considered at the local authority's resource panel, this acts as an effective catalyst for agreeing resources and providing direction.
29. Children benefit from social workers who promote family time with parents, relatives and friends and support them to pursue hobbies and interests. Social workers understand the importance of education and act as advocates for children. However, this is not matched by equally strong support from the virtual school. The local authority is aware that this is an area for development. Personal education plans are not sufficiently effective in supporting children's educational achievement and although there has been a reduction in the number of children not receiving full-time education, this is still a key area the virtual school knows it needs to address. More positively, most schools report proactive and helpful guidance from the virtual school.
30. The timeliness with which health assessments for children in care are completed has dropped over the last year, particularly in the case of initial health assessments. Dental health assessments are even more challenging, and the local authority is working with the Integrated Care Board to address this.
31. The local authority has achieved an increase in its fostering capacity over the last year. Foster carers value the community feel and support they receive from the local authority's hub-based model of support, which helps to prevent unplanned endings and promotes stability for children and the well-being of foster carers. Despite this, and in large part in response to national pressures,

there are a small number of children in unregistered children's homes, most of whom have complex needs. These arrangements do not provide for the oversight and safeguarding assurance of registered homes. Senior leaders are monitoring these situations closely and have had some success in finding registered homes for children. For the smaller number of these children who are aged 16 or 17, and are living in unregulated supported accommodation, the local authority is not always clear about whether these children are receiving support or care. As a result, leaders have not always been able to be certain about the number of children living in arrangements that are actually unregistered children's homes. This was identified during the inspection and, as a consequence, senior leaders, recognising that further progress is required in this area, put in place actions to address this issue.

32. While there is not always a sufficiently early or strong focus on securing permanent homes for children through their reviews or wider planning, much work has been done to address this and to make progress over the last few months. The resource panel and the recently implemented permanence tracker and meeting are making a real difference in ensuring that children gain the emotional and practical benefits of a secure home earlier. Almost half of children with a plan for long-term mainstream foster care are living with carers they have been matched with. A further and significant number of children are currently benefiting from living with connected persons carers.
33. The local authority approach to securing permanence for children who can benefit from adoption is strong. Adoption is secured for a relatively high number of children early on through foster to adopt carers. Effective working with the regional adoption agency (Adoption West RAA) helps to promptly secure the best outcomes for children. The RAA comments positively on joint working with North Somerset, as do adopters about the quality of the support they receive. Life-story work is consistently completed and appropriate.
34. Children who secure permanence through routes other than adoption do not always benefit from life-story work to help them develop a narrative that helps them to understand how they come to be where they are in their lives. For those who do, this is often of good quality, but it is the exception rather than the rule.
35. The local authority is committed to strengthening its focus on children and children's engagement in shaping both their own care and wider service developments. The recruitment of the young director is at the heart of this. She is an effective advocate for children in care and her care-experienced peers. Children's reviews and their records are often written to children, and this is a positive, although there is more to do to embed the child-centred approach to language to which senior leaders aspire. Recent use of an app specifically for communication with children in care is proving popular with children. Children in care and care-experienced young people's engagement in the corporate parenting panel is also a positive. This is an important cultural change but is

still at a relatively early stage in terms of engaging a wider range of children in care. The children in care award day and Weston Carnival are much enjoyed and are real celebrations of and for children in care.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

36. Personal advisers (PAs) build supportive and trusting relationships with their care-experienced young people. They visit or speak to them in line with their needs and understand their lived experiences well. This helps to build resilience and adjust to independent living.
37. For most care-experienced young people, their PAs are allocated at 17, with a small number being allocated a PA closer to their 18th birthdays. For these care-experienced young people, this can lead to delayed or rushed transitions. The local authority is aware of this and is working on introducing PAs at 16 to enable earlier engagement. Care-experienced young people have access to PA support until the age of 25 to ensure help and guidance is available for their journeys into adulthood.
38. Care-experienced young people live in suitable accommodation and receive the right help to meet their religious and cultural needs. Interpreters and language courses are used effectively to support communication for those young people who have arrived from outside the UK. Care-experienced young people also benefit from a dedicated emotional well-being service to assist them with past trauma and to their new communities.
39. PAs work effectively to keep in touch with care-experienced young people to ensure they receive timely help and advice, ensuring their stability and reducing potential drift. PAs encourage and support care-experienced young people to be involved in a range of social and recreational activities including paying for their gym membership, which enhances their well-being and helps them to feel part of their communities.
40. PAs routinely discuss young people's rights, entitlements and responsibilities with them, which enables them to gain control of their lives. Young people are aware of the complaints procedure and their concerns are acted on appropriately. Care-experienced young people are given a range of opportunities to contribute to influencing service improvements. They benefit from a comprehensive and accessible local offer which includes full exemption from council tax up to 25, free access to Wi-Fi and consistent support with paying for food and utilities. PAs ensure the offer is fully understood by young people. Care-experienced young people are provided with the key documents they need, such as national insurance numbers, birth certificates and passports. Most are registered with GPs and access their health histories.
41. The achievements of care-experienced young people are celebrated. PAs are aspirational encouraging them to be ambitious and to engage fully with

preparation for adulthood. Those who are parents benefit from a wide range of support and advice from their PAs to support them to become successful parents, including through access to the family well-being team.

42. The quality of most pathway plans is strong and plans are in line with care-experienced young people's needs and circumstances. Many pathway plans are co-produced, often written to care experienced young people, although a very small number are not updated quickly enough when young people's circumstances change. A range of options are available to support young people to achieve their potential through education, employment or training. These include direct support from PAs, and a new dedicated education, employment and training coach. Apprenticeship opportunities remain limited since the pandemic; there are plans in place to increase the number and range of opportunities locally.
43. PAs recognise and understand the complexities of racial, cultural, and sexual and gender identity. They complete meaningful and sensitive direct work, including in relation to sexual and gender identity, to advise and befriend care-experienced young people at times of turmoil.
44. Care-experienced young people know that they are entitled to see their records whenever they need to and do take up this right. Most live in suitable accommodation and the small number who do not receive appropriate and ongoing advice and support.

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

45. A corporate restructure of North Somerset's directorate soon after the last judgement inspection has increased the capacity of the director and enabled a more targeted focus on children's services. This has been strengthened further by the arrival of a permanent assistant director at the end of 2021, who has been a key driver for progress. More recently, a permanent senior leadership team has been appointed, and focused and realistic improvement plans with partner agencies identify areas of strength and weakness, to help secure the improvements needed for children.
46. Despite these very recent positive changes, the pace of progress since the last inspection has been too slow. The improvement plan is not fully implemented and there is insufficient impact for children and families. Not all areas for improvement have been fully addressed since the last inspection and some required changes to practice are not embedded. Inconsistencies in the quality of practice for children and their families are too broad. Management oversight is not consistently of a sufficient quality to raise standards and avoid delay for some children.
47. The stable senior leadership team has assisted in providing more consistent and clearer direction to staff and this has increased their confidence. Senior leaders

have done much work to understand and improve what had become a fractured culture among staff and to build relationships across children's services, to lay the foundations for improvement. The improvement work is supported by relevant external expertise, including from other local authorities, and is underpinned by backing from political leaders and the chief executive, who have committed to prioritise the support to children's services.

48. The chief executive, director and lead member are aware of local challenges and areas for improvement. They are aspirational and committed corporate parents and the lead member strongly advocates for a 'whole council approach' for children and care-experienced young people. This is evident in the oversight and representation of care-experienced young people at the corporate parenting board and the commitment to the young director post and participation roles which have strengthened the voices and understanding of children in care and care-experienced young people.
49. Leaders have implemented a strengths and relationship-based practice approach and social work model which are becoming progressively better understood by staff. Although this approach is benefiting some children, it is not enabling consistent outcomes for all children and further work is needed to ensure that more children benefit from this model across children's services.
50. Progress has been made through the introduction of the refreshed and aligned quality assurance framework. Increased capacity within the service has sharpened leaders' focus on collaborative practice reviews (CPRs) to drive up standards in practice for children. Further work is needed to embed this framework and more work is underway to strengthen how CPRs are used, to improve practice and agree an understanding about what good looks like. The local authority has responded effectively to the learning about practice that they gained from the scrutiny provided by both spotlight and thematic audits. This has helped with responding to and strengthening practice, through increasing partner agencies' attendance at strategy meetings and addressing weaker practice in the fostering and IRO services.
51. The recent implementation of a much improved and sophisticated performance management system is proving effective in informing and developing senior leaders' understanding of the quality and impact of practice for children. Significant as this step forward is, and although there are some early signs of it making a positive difference, for example in the MASH and in the oversight of pre-proceedings work, it is still at a relatively early stage and so impact is necessarily limited at present.
52. There are a number of areas where practice has been strengthened, including a comprehensive early help offer and a much-improved front door; these are significant milestones. Equally, the quality and oversight of pre-proceedings work, an increased focus on permanency and matching for children, the extended model of support to foster carers, work with children who have been

adopted and work with partners in accommodating and supporting the growing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are also strengths.

53. Leaders have a focus on improving staff supervision, including through the introduction of a new template, but impact is limited. Leaders have not yet ensured that managers are providing consistent oversight of key decisions for children, to allow for reflection and wider planning within the family support and safeguarding and children in care teams. Supervision is too variable in quality, and there are notable gaps in frequency. Despite this, most social workers are positive about working for North Somerset. They describe a valuable training offer and visible and supportive managers. However, this is not always evidenced in children's records.
54. Multi-agency governance structures and partnerships have been strengthened, which has led to tangible improvements in some areas. This includes work within the front door and with police partners to strengthen the physical presence of the police in the MASH and in agreeing a unified strategic response across the partnership to those children at risk of extra-familial harm. Further work is needed to strengthen the physical police presence and response within the MASH and to provide a robust strategic and practice response to children at risk of extra-familial harm.
55. Leaders have recognised the ongoing challenges in ensuring sufficient homes for children and young people, including those with the most complex needs. As a consequence, they have implemented a comprehensive sufficiency plan, which includes further funding to provide an increased financial offer to foster carers, an enhanced package for those in 'staying put' arrangements and a strengthened 16+ accommodation offer. The local authority has more work to do to ensure those children in unregistered settings are placed in appropriate and safe accommodation to meet their needs and that staff recognise their care and support needs when finding them homes to meet their needs.
56. There is a broad workforce development strategy and progression offer for social workers in North Somerset to promote retention. Staff are provided with a wide range of flexible and creative training. Further work is planned to offer staff training that is reflective of shortfalls in practice, to develop and raise practice standards.
57. Leaders are aware of the fragility of staffing, which includes high levels of sickness in team manager posts, a significant turnover of staff and almost a third of posts currently vacant, leading to high reliance on temporary agency staff. This has impacted on children's experiences and wider improvement due to having to stretch capacity across services. Leaders have put in place actions to improve recruitment and retention, including reducing caseloads and enhancing pay and support for newly qualified social workers and working with local universities, but the impact of this is yet to be seen and staffing sufficiency remains a significant and ongoing challenge.

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