

Inspection of Essex local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 26 to 30 June 2023

Lead inspector: Kendra Bell, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection in 2018, when children's services in Essex were judged to be outstanding overall, the quality of services has been further strengthened and the areas for improvement have been addressed. The arrangements for children who are privately fostered and the quality of plans for disabled children are much improved. Children in need of help and protection are safeguarded well and most children in care are well cared for and make good progress, although the quality of support for separated migrant children is inconsistent. Care leavers have benefited from improved support and opportunities that help them to live successfully as young adults.

Strong and stable leadership, well-established governance systems, clear strategic aims and effective partnership arrangements are the cornerstones on which good practice is flourishing and children's experiences are being improved. Children's needs are at the heart of decision-making and the whole workforce is unrelenting in its commitment, passion and determination to achieve even better progress for children. The continued investment in new service initiatives is making a significant and positive difference to many children. Leaders are outward looking and forward

thinking, already anticipating and planning for future changes to ensure that continued high-quality and sustainable services are provided to children.

What needs to improve?

- Consistent, high-quality care and support for all separated migrant children and care leavers.

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

1. Children and families who need help and support receive a timely and proportionate response from the children and families hub. A number of consultation telephone lines give professionals and members of the public the opportunity to talk through their concerns with workers and to agree next steps. Workers in the hub gather a range of information from parents, schools and partners to help them to understand the needs of children and to identify the services that are best suited to meet their needs. Parents provide informed consent at every stage of the process; when necessary, decisions to dispense with parental consent are appropriately taken by senior workers. Managers have consistent oversight of key information and decision-making for children at this early stage. When there is risk of harm to children, workers take immediate safeguarding action and child protection referrals are passed swiftly to statutory services.
2. Children and families have access to a wide range of community-based universal services that successfully help to resolve difficulties at an early stage. When children and families need more intensive early help, they receive high-quality support from the family solutions team. Highly skilled workers provide purposeful and bespoke interventions that make positive differences to families. Holistic assessments inform targeted support plans that bring together the professionals who are best placed to work with and support the family. Support plans are reviewed regularly by the team around the family to ensure that they are achieving positive change for children and improving family circumstances. The quality and impact of the support provided to children and families by the family solutions team are consistently good.
3. Children who need immediate help and support at the weekends are helped effectively by the emergency duty service. Timely action is taken to safeguard children when needed.
4. Child and family assessments, including those for disabled children and for unborn children, are comprehensive, thoughtful and analytical. The trauma-informed approach taken by workers sensitively explores how children see and feel about themselves. Meaningful direct work clearly captures each child's sense of identity. Assessments are informed by children and include the views of parents and carers. Management oversight is strong and evaluative and assessments lead to well-formulated plans that focus on what needs to change

to improve children's lives. Social workers work closely with parents and carers to improve children's progress and experiences, and to help them to understand why decisions are taken to move into child protection or pre-proceedings and court proceedings if these actions are necessary.

5. Children at risk of significant harm receive a thorough and timely response. Multi-agency strategy discussions are held quickly. They are well attended by professionals, who share relevant information to inform a collective understanding of risk and harm to the child. These discussions lead to appropriate decision-making and a robust action plan. Child protection investigations are comprehensive and suitably curious. They lead to outcomes that are proportionate to the child's needs and level of risk. Informed decisions are taken to progress to initial child protection conferences when children are at continued risk of significant harm. Review child protection conferences are held regularly to monitor the progress of children's plans. Conferences rigorously evaluate the impact of the plan in reducing harm to children. When concerns for children decrease, they are stepped down to services that are most suited to their needs.
6. Children subject to child-in-need and child protection plans make good progress. Plans are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes in children's circumstances and needs. Parents are supported to engage in challenging pieces of work to improve their parenting, strengthen family relationships and address issues that impact on the care that they provide. Social work practice and multidisciplinary interventions are making a significant and positive difference to many children's lives.
7. Children on the edge of care are supported to remain safely living at home whenever possible. Family group conferences are used well to bring the extended network around the family for extra support. Specialist intervention teams provide intensive and highly effective family support at times of crisis to prevent family breakdown. Many children are supported to remain living safely at home and are diverted from going into care.
8. Disabled children in need of help and protection receive a high level of support. The new 'My assessment plan' brings together schools and health professionals to provide the right support and services to meet need. Review meetings are held regularly to monitor the pace of progress, with clearly defined actions for professionals to take forward. Children receive packages of care and support to help them to achieve their potential and to enable them to live with their families. They benefit from bespoke direct work that helps them to understand and manage their feelings. Parents are helped to provide attuned and effective responses to their children's needs.
9. When plans do not sufficiently reduce risk of harm for children, appropriate decisions are taken to escalate to public law pre-proceedings. Clearly written letters before proceedings are sent to parents, which help them to understand

what needs to change for their children to remain in their care. Skilled family centre workers complete parenting assessment programmes and intensive targeted interventions with parents to help determine their parenting ability and capacity. Over half of families are successfully helped to remain together and diverted from court proceedings. A small number of children are subject to pre-proceedings for an extended period. The reasons for delay are multifaceted. However, for a small number of children, delay is not always purposeful.

10. Appropriate advice and guidance are provided to children aged 16 and 17 who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness. They are helped to access support and safe accommodation in line with their needs.
11. Children who are known to live in private fostering arrangements receive excellent support. Assessments are thorough and the quality of intervention and direct work provided to children and their carers is consistently good. This helps children to feel settled, secure and cared for. The annual consideration of the suitability of long-term private fostering arrangements is undertaken by a reviewing officer who is outside the line management of the service and therefore able to provide independent assurance.
12. Children and young people at risk or potential risk of extrafamilial harm, including those in care and care leavers, receive high levels of support. Highly responsive workers review past behaviours to understand the root causes of risk. They quickly identify appropriate interventions that will safeguard children and young people. Workers are supported by new and specially trained 'risk in the community' workers, who help to formulate plans that are intended to successfully divert children and young people away from harm and into positive activities. This approach is having a positive impact on reducing risks. Senior managers and partners regularly review children's situations to understand the impact and progress of the plan. Proactive and protective action is taken to disrupt exploitation and to safeguard children, using legal protections when necessary.
13. When children and young people go missing from home and care, they are offered a 'missing chat'. These chats provide rich information about push-and-pull factors and are used effectively to inform next steps and actions. The support provided by the 'missing coordinator', who is an accredited mental health social worker, is highly valuable. They share knowledge and expertise with social workers to enhance their understanding of the correlation between mental health and going missing, which, in turn, strengthens the response provided to children and young people. The missing coordinator also attends multi-agency meetings for children at risk of extrafamilial harm, to inform children's safety plans. They help to ensure that the links between going missing, risks outside the home and mental health are explored and understood well for children by the professional network.

14. The integrated electively home educated and children missing education team operates strong and effective systems to monitor children who are missing education and to get them back into education as soon as possible. Equally, the safeguarding arrangements for the increasing number of electively home educated children are highly effective and well researched. Leaders collect the information they need to ensure that vulnerable children are prioritised for additional support when needed.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

15. A high proportion of children come into care in a planned way and decision-making is based on thorough assessment. Many children in care, including disabled children, make excellent progress. Many children are very well looked after by foster carers, including connected carers. Some children live in specialist schools or children's homes if these are best suited to meet their needs. They are helped to build caring relationships and to achieve a sense of belonging and permanence. Senior managers regularly track the progress of children's permanence plans to prevent delay.
16. For some children, permanence is achieved through adoption. The planning for these children is exceptionally strong and begins early to prevent delay. Children remain with their brothers and sisters whenever possible and excellent direct work is undertaken with children to help them to understand their journey through care and into their new adoptive family. Well-written later-life letters and bright and colourful life-story books help adopted children to understand their history and why decisions were made on their behalf when they were younger.
17. When it is safe and in their best interests, children in care are supported to return home to the care of their parents. The assessment, planning and arrangements for these children are effective. The specialist intervention teams provide high levels of support to children and their parents to achieve successful return-home plans. For children subject to care orders, senior managers oversee the plan for reunification and workers progress revocation applications to prevent statutory intervention continuing for longer than is required.
18. If children are unable to remain in the care of their parents, family group conferences are used effectively to explore whether care can be provided by other family members. An increasing number of children live within their family networks and achieve permanence through special guardianship orders. This is a positive outcome for these children.
19. Most children in care enjoy positive relationships with their social workers, who are consistent adults in their lives. Social workers' faces light up when talking about children and they are proud, committed and caring 'co-parents'. The term 'co-parents' is used by the authority at the request of children in care to

describe their role as corporate parents. Many workers visit children regularly to build trust and to help children to talk openly about their wishes, feelings and aspirations. Children are helped to understand their journey into care and workers undertake bespoke and creative direct work with them. However, a small number of disabled children and separated migrant children are not always visited in line with their needs. This impacts on the opportunity for children to develop trusting relationships with their social workers and to feel able to share their feelings and experiences with them.

20. Separated migrant children are helped to feel welcome and safe when they come into care. Many live with foster carers who reflect their ethnicity and culture, and they get the help that they need to settle into their new schools and communities. They are encouraged to attend the 'Proud to be me' group for children in care, where they can explore their cultures and have opportunities to try new activities and to make new friends. However, social workers are not consistently exploring their life experiences to understand their journeys to the UK and the impact of separation and trauma for them. Senior leaders acknowledge the need to build further on their response to the increasing number of separated migrant children in care.
21. The introduction of 'life plans' for children in care has positively enhanced the quality of their care plans. The life plans use children's own words and include photos, bringing their personality, uniqueness and aspirations to life. Everyone in the child's network celebrates their achievements. Children are helped to feel proud of who they are. They spend time with family members and people who are important to them, and their views fully inform family-time arrangements.
22. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) regularly review children's life plans with them and check in with them at midway points between reviews. Children participate in their reviews and are helped to understand the decisions taken about their care, who will help them to continue to make progress and how this will be achieved.
23. Children's health needs are regularly reviewed, and they have easy access to emotional and mental health support when needed.
24. Children take part in a wide range of hobbies and are well supported to make good educational progress. A recently launched personal education plan (PEP) includes a stronger focus on their wishes and feelings. PEPs include educational and developmental targets which are precise and achievable for children, and children receive the support that they need to realise their potential in school and other provisions.
25. A very small number of children experience too many changes in their care arrangements and a small number of older children with more complex needs live in unregistered children's homes as a result of sufficiency challenges. Senior leaders have robust oversight of these children and persistent efforts are taken

to move them to suitably registered children's homes at the earliest point in time. Senior managers are reflective and responsive in addressing the inherent risks that these arrangements may present for children.

26. Children are supported by the involvement team to have their voices heard. They are encouraged to attend the Children in Care Council, where they make a significant impact. Children who attend the council are confident and energetic. They are assured that their experiences are listened to and acted on by political and corporate senior leaders. They take part in a wide range of celebratory, consultative and activity events which enable them to have fun, socialise with peers and share their experiences. These events help them to develop confidence and self-esteem. Children speak highly of the 'Proud to be me' sessions, where children from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds come together to explore and share their identity, culture and traditions.
27. Robust assessment and panel processes support social workers, managers and panel members to scrutinise applications from prospective foster carers and adopters effectively. Essex, as part of a regional adoption alliance (Adopt East), retains many of the core functions for adoption. Foster carers and adopters feel well supported in their journeys. They receive high levels of support from social workers and benefit from an extensive training package. They value the access to extensive wraparound support packages that include outreach workers, mental health coordinators and therapeutic fostering staff. They also benefit from bespoke and flexible support from community-based support hubs run by foster carers and adopters.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

28. Care leavers receive high-quality support from personal advisers and social workers, who know them well. The leaving care team supports children in care from 16 and carefully plans their transition to leaving care at 18. Personal advisers visit care leavers frequently and in line with their needs. This enables strong and enduring relationships to develop. Personal advisers help care leavers to gain practical skills, such as cooking and budgeting, and use direct work and cultural genograms to help to explore gaps in their understanding of their life histories. Personal advisers take time to help care leavers re-establish important relationships; this helps them to create wider support networks for when they leave care.
29. Personal advisers are fiercely proud of the care leavers with whom they work. They provide high levels of support in times of crisis, going above and beyond, when it is needed most. Care leavers see personal advisers as trusted and safe adults and value their relationships with them.
30. Care leavers are supported by the involvement team to have an influential voice in Essex. They are helped to understand their rights and they engage in purposeful consultation. They provide extensive feedback, which is used well by

leaders and managers to shape services and practice. Care leavers understand the local offer and are supported to access funding for help with purchasing the essential things that they need in life. This includes funding for driving lessons and support with job interviews and setting up home. Care leavers co-designed the new offer and, as part of that, changed the language from 'corporate parenting' to 'co-parenting' to reflect their views. They also helped to set up a support group for care leavers when concerns are raised during pregnancy regarding future parenting capacity.

31. Most children in care aged 16 and 17 and care leavers have good-quality pathway plans that are written with them. Plans reflect their interests and aspirations and sensitively identify their needs and vulnerabilities. Plans are clear about the support that they need and who will help them. Their physical and emotional health needs are met well and they have access to their health histories. Personal advisers help them to feel less isolated and they have good access to support from a mental health coordinator to help them with their emotional health. Separated migrant care leavers are helped by an immigration support worker who supports them with their asylum applications. They are helped to meet other care leavers in similar situations and they take part in activities such as attending the gym, going to restaurants and accessing the 'twilight' group to help them to develop friendships.
32. An increasing number of care leavers are successfully engaged in employment, education or training. Targeted youth advisers and employability advisers attend care leaver groups around the county to offer practical support and advice to young people. Young people who are not in education, training or employment are helped effectively to gain employability skills, to prepare for job interviews and to access college, apprenticeships and further and higher education. A growing number of links with local employers provide care leavers with opportunities for work experience, apprenticeships and other forms of employment. Three care leavers are currently undertaking an apprenticeship with children's services and working on a bespoke care leaver project.
33. Most care leavers live in suitable and safe accommodation that meets their needs. This includes 'staying put', supported accommodation and independent living. Personal advisers carefully help to match their needs to housing options and a new personal adviser for housing helps them to access the most suitable, secure and sustainable housing available. A joint housing protocol, currently in draft form, has been created to achieve a more consistent approach and an agreed pathway for care leavers across all 12 district councils. Senior managers were already working well with housing partners to support care leavers to access priority housing, before the development of this protocol.
34. Personal advisers are alert to identifying risk and work well with other agencies to help to safeguard care leavers. Professionals from adult services, health, prisons and mental health services come together effectively to plan their

support for care leavers and provide targeted help in times of increased vulnerability, risk and crisis.

35. Care leavers who are parents have access to a range of helpful and practical support during pregnancy and as new parents. They are helped and supported by personal advisers who act like good co-grandparents, and family centre workers help them to prepare for their new role as parents. A care leaver young parents' group helps them to make links with other young parents, and bespoke emotional and practical support is provided to care leavers who are separated from their children.
36. Care leavers in custody are supported well and receive frequent communication, visits and practical and emotional support from their personal advisers, to help maintain positive and trusted relationships. The level of visiting and support is in line with young people's wishes. Personal advisers work effectively with relevant agencies to support and plan for care leavers moving back into the community.
37. Care leavers over 21 have access to good support from their allocated personal adviser and specialist advisers. They are provided with support in line with their needs, and personal advisers are there for them during challenging times.

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

38. Children are at the heart of the council's 'Everyone's Essex' vision. Political and corporate leaders continue to be highly committed to investing in the right services to meet the growing complexity of children's needs. A comprehensive suite of corporate plans demonstrates the determination and collective ambition of leaders in helping children to thrive. The views of children and families are captured extensively at key points in time and are used to influence and inform strategic plans, operational practice and service delivery.
39. Leaders know their children and their communities well. They are responsive to the changing demographics in their communities and the pressures that many children and families are facing from the ongoing impact of the pandemic and increased poverty and hardship. An accurate self-assessment provides senior leaders with a thorough overview of service strengths and areas for further development. They understand the challenges that they are facing and have long-term strategic plans in place to tackle them.
40. Since the last inspection in 2018, senior leaders have focused on delivering sustainable and high-quality services for children and have embarked on a programme of transformation and improvement. The workforce is actively engaged in continuously developing new approaches and initiatives that are improving the lives and experiences of children. The recently launched strategy to promote anti-racist practice reflects organisational core values and acts as a blueprint for influencing culture, behaviours, practice and service design. It is

already beginning to influence practice positively with children. The virtual school is in the process of completely revolutionising the way it operates as a school, to maximise the benefits for children in care. The style and format of children's care plans have been transformed to better capture the child's personality, identity and aspirations. A new multidisciplinary team and 'risk in the community' workers are making a positive difference to children. The introduction of employability workers, housing workers and emotional well-being workers is helping to improve the experiences and progress of care leavers.

41. A range of well-functioning executive boards and sub-groups regularly monitor, evaluate and review the effectiveness of partners in meeting their caring and safeguarding responsibilities for children. The judiciary and key partners, including schools, report positively on the strength of strategic relationships and the impact on services for children. There is effective support and challenge when services are not making the expected difference for children.
42. Leaders at all levels are caring and proud co-parents and co-grandparents to children in care, care leavers and their children. The corporate parenting board is well established and highly effective in championing and advocating for improved outcomes for children. The Children in Care Council is very active and influential. Children's voices are heard and their experiences help to transform services. They make films to share their experiences and to help others to understand their journeys. They have co-designed a series of beautifully crafted and published story books to help younger children to understand their journey in care.
43. A long-term sufficiency strategy sets out how leaders will meet the demand for suitable homes for children. This includes strengthening prevention services to help to keep children living at home and developing strong and effective commissioning arrangements with external providers. Plans are well under way to increase the number of foster carers, including connected carers, and the provision of registered children's homes and regulated accommodation. Progress has already been made to increase the capacity of emergency care provision and further increases are imminent. However, it is too soon to see the full impact of the plan, and the sufficiency of homes for older children and those with more complex needs remains an ongoing challenge.
44. Senior leaders make effective use of performance information to identify and plan for emerging trends and to address the impact of increased demand for children's services. An intelligent performance management information system provides leaders and managers with live data, together with an accurate oversight of children receiving services and of key performance areas. Leaders are aware of inconsistencies in the quality of tracking systems to monitor the progress of children in pre-proceedings arrangements. While a new system will go live later this year, the current systems are not accurately reflecting progress for children.

45. Leaders actively promote and support organisational and individual learning and a comprehensive internal learning library brings learning together in one place. Every learning opportunity is used and taken back into practice, from national programmes to team diagnostics, case audits, good practice reviews and complaints. Workers create training films to share learning and provide key messages regarding working effectively with children. The whole workforce benefits from an extensive programme of continuous professional development. This includes practice tools, online resources, well-being tools and opportunity for further accredited academic study leading to qualifications and systemic leadership and management training. Additional investment has expanded the reach of quality assurance activity across more practice areas. A regular and extensive cycle of case audits and multi-agency and thematic audits provides senior leaders and managers with an accurate insight into practice and the opportunity to learn from emerging themes. Direct feedback and reflections from children, families and workers add richness to this learning activity.
46. Leaders are responding to and managing workforce pressures well. While the workforce is relatively stable, recruitment and retention of workers are key priorities. The long-term strategic plan sets out clear priorities for the workforce and an enhanced employment offer focuses on areas that are important to staff. Newly qualified workers are mostly very well supported and represent a large percentage of new starters. Workers value the support from their managers. They feel cared for and have opportunities to develop and progress their career. Workers' caseloads are generally manageable and, even at times of increased workloads and demands, they feel very well supported. Supervision is mostly regular and reflective. It is used effectively to oversee the progress of children's plans and supports professional practice and workers' well-being.
47. Workers enjoy working for Essex and morale is extremely high. They are rightly proud of their work with children. Their words and actions convey a genuine sense of belonging, safety and trust in managers, leaders and the organisation.

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