

Inspection of North Yorkshire local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 July 2023

Lead inspector: Jan Edwards, 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

Children and their families in North Yorkshire benefit from an outstanding children's service. Leaders have built on their well-established culture and service initiatives to further develop and improve services for children since the outstanding judgement at the last inspection in 2018. The new judgement area for care leavers is also judged outstanding.

Children and families have access to high-quality services when they need them. All services share high aspiration and ambition for children, which enhances their lives and opportunities. The strengths-based practice model is well embedded and fully understood. It provides the cultural cornerstone across all areas of the service and partnership working. The interface between children's social care and early help has been strengthened, with a clear demarcation and application of threshold and strong social work oversight. Children in need of help and protection are safeguarded well. Children come into care when it is appropriate to do so. Every effort is made to support children's connections to family and their communities and for them to return home safely. Those children who need to remain in care are supported well and helped to make progress. Leaders take their responsibility towards care leavers seriously and this is exemplified by the 'always here' approach to support care leavers at any age.

What needs to improve?

- The recording of manager oversight and decision-making within the Public Law Outline, and the quality of the letter before proceedings to make it accessible for parents.

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

1. Children in North Yorkshire benefit from an effective early help service that quickly responds to the needs of children and families. There is a range of services and targeted interventions to help families at the earliest opportunity. Early help assessments are thorough, well written and completed within a time frame that is meaningful for the child and family. The whole-service strength-based model is used effectively to identify what is working well and what needs to change, including recommendations for next steps. Use of the cultural genogram is well embedded in practice to build an accurate picture of who can provide support to keep children safe within their families.
2. There is a prompt and appropriate response to concerns for children, including out of normal working hours. In the multi-agency screening team (MAST), there are clear systems in place to ensure that all new contacts are reviewed by a manager and promptly allocated for social work screening. Appropriate thresholds are applied, and step-across arrangements to early help are managed effectively, which ensure that children and families receive the right level of help and support. Proportionate RAG (red-amber-green) rating ensures that urgent cases are screened within an hour. However, the recording of ethnicity is not routinely taking place, meaning that issues of culture and identity may not be sufficiently informing decision-making or future interventions.
3. Screening by social workers considers the history and risks for children and work is promptly forwarded on for the next steps, including safety planning. Daily screening meetings in the MAST are held when agreed criteria are met, for example repeat domestic abuse notifications. This results in a sharp focus on cumulative patterns of harm in the context of the child's current situation. Language used by social workers and partners in the MAST unambiguously reflects the practice model, which ensures that the child is kept at the forefront of decision-making.
4. Domestic abuse concerns are screened daily. A consistent approach to information-sharing ensures that responses to children who have been exposed to risks of domestic abuse are prompt and proportionate to ensure their well-being and safety.
5. Specialist exploitation workers based in the MAST cover each locality of the county. They offer additional strength to the 'front door' and children's

workforce through their specialist knowledge and advice. Multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings are held in the MAST in response to heightened concerns of exploitation. This leads to a joint understanding of the level of risks and known associates and an identification of steps to reduce the risk for children.

6. A professionals' consultation line is well used by partners when they need to seek advice about whether a referral is needed when they have concerns about a child. Senior leaders responded to inspection findings and promptly introduced a more robust system to ensure that, when advice was provided for professionals to make a referral, the referral was made at the time directly to a contact officer. This means that there is no delay for children in having their needs assessed.
7. Children at risk of harm are considered at timely strategy meetings, which are attended by key professionals, with good multi-agency information-sharing to inform decision-making. Considering history, alongside the presenting issues, helps to determine a threshold for action. Decisions made at strategy discussions are sufficiently detailed, and lead to well-informed child protection enquiries.
8. Social workers have an insightful understanding of the needs of children and families. This is as a result of their commitment to the service's chosen model of practice, which is consistently and credibly applied by the workforce. Assessments for children, including disabled children, strongly reflect the relational strength-based approach and that social workers understand the child's lived experience. There is a clear analysis of strengths and risk and a sharp focus on the family network, meaning that children are well supported by their family and in their communities. Assessments are updated and changed as a result of emerging risks, reflecting the most current situation.
9. Social workers are skilled at undertaking sensitive and creative direct work with children and their families, which determines the focus and pace of the work. An app is used to capture the voice of children when it is age-appropriate to do so and forms the basis of further direct work.
10. There is a steadfast emphasis on family and community networks by social workers, who embed this in their planning to enhance the support for children. Professionals and families consistently attend child-in-need and child protection meetings. These meetings are effective forums for timely information-sharing, planning and decision-making for children and their families. Children's plans include a clear timeline that provides a trajectory for planned interventions. This ensures that the plan keeps on track and that the interventions make a positive difference, improve outcomes and remain meaningful for children and their families. Safety planning is routinely completed with families and co-produced with them, incorporating the wider family network. This means that all parties

have clarity as to mutual expectations and understanding of what they need to do to prevent or reduce risk for children.

11. When child protection planning has not reduced risk effectively, the vast majority of children are appropriately escalated to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline. Social workers carefully consider care arrangements and, where appropriate, children remain in the care of their wider families. Managers understand the reasons when some children remain in pre-proceedings beyond the expected timescales. Senior managers have oversight of timeliness at key review points, although their rationale for decisions is not made explicit in children's records. Letters before proceedings are variable in presentation, accessibility of language and content. There is an overemphasis on the long history of concerns, with a loss of focus on the issues and expectations of parents.
12. Children are seen at a frequency that meets their needs. Visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. Direct work using words and pictures, play and conversation supports children to build trusting relationships. Social workers know their children well and have developed effective relationships with parents, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change. Social workers consult the psychologically informed partnership approach (PIPA) service to develop insight into approaches in how to engage parents. This service also provides direct work for children and families, successfully supporting children to live at home. Where relationships have been more challenging to develop, social workers have persisted and are unafraid to have difficult conversations about children's futures.
13. Children who live in private fostering arrangements are safeguarded effectively. Assessments are well written and comprehensive and address children's needs and the capacity of carers. Safeguarding checks are in place and good oversight from managers ensures that these arrangements continue to be appropriate.
14. Processes for the recording and tracking of the management of allegations against people who work with children are very strong. The local authority benefits from designated officers who are knowledgeable and compassionate, taking care to balance the safeguarding of children with robust investigations and support and advice to individuals and organisations.
15. Children who go missing are identified and supported well to enable risks to reduce. Weekly missing-from-home-or-care meetings are chaired by specialist coordinators who are experienced and skilled in analysing and sharing information with partners. Robust monitoring of children who repeatedly go missing and hit identified trigger points ensures that they are assessed as high priority, with risks being discussed at MACE meetings. This ensures that the risks and wider concerns for children are fully understood by all professionals and used in mapping across to children who may be at risk of exploitation.

Return home interviews are thorough and child-focused, providing rich information to inform future work with children and understand wider risk management.

16. Children and young people who are at risk from exploitation, including children in care and care leavers, receive a coordinated multi-agency response that quickly addresses concerns. Social workers place an emphasis in their safety planning on building relationships and developing family networks to allow children to safely share their concerns. Exploitation risk assessments are comprehensive and effective in developing multi-agency plans to reduce risks.
17. There are robust and effective systems to monitor children who are missing education and those who are home educated. When children are missing from school, they are quickly located and given the support that they need to return to education. Staff liaise well with social workers to ensure that all knowledge is shared, and they contribute to an effective decision or plan. Parents wishing to electively home educate their child are well informed by staff about what this entails. If the offer of education is not suitable, staff ensure that this is resolved or that children are returned to school.
18. When children who are 16 to 17 years old present as homeless, there is a swift response from children's social care and housing under a robustly applied joint housing protocol. As a result, children are offered accommodation options, including to go into care to ensure that they are well supported. Homelessness prevention workers work closely with children and offer mediation to repair their family relationships, to support them to live successfully at home, or to develop their life skills to live independently.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

19. Decisions for children to enter care are made in a timely manner and when it is in their interests to do so. A high proportion of children enter care in a planned way. The robustly applied approach of family 'finding' and family 'seeing' means that social workers make extensive efforts to identify family members. This means that children can remain within their family, whether in formal connected carer placements or in an informal family arrangement, when it is assessed as being the best care for children. These arrangements are reinforced through clear support plans. The Best Practice and Scrutiny Forum, assisted through effective performance dashboards, identify barriers to permanence and provide clear advice as to next steps for early permanence planning.
20. Children leave care and return to their families when it is right to do so. Reunification is carefully planned, following successful interventions and preparation. This allows children to be supported to live successfully with their families whenever possible.

21. Assessments capture the voice of the child to understand their views, feelings and wishes when they enter care. Children are helped to understand their plan about where they will be living through direct work, words and pictures and sensitive and creative life-story work. Social workers speak with great care and affection about children and the progress they make, and they are aspirational for them.
22. The importance for children of lifelong connections with their birth family is embedded in practice. Arrangements for family time are considered alongside children's views, wishes and feelings. Children are supported to maintain important relationships in their lives. Social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) are proactive in supporting children's views when they do not wish to see parents, but work persistently and creatively to re-establish family relationships.
23. When appropriate, children achieve permanence through adoption. North Yorkshire is part of a regional adoption agency (One Adoption North and Humber) and retains most of the core adoption functions. Adopters are prepared well for the adoption task, including having access to therapeutic parenting training, which supports effective transitions for children. For other children, special guardianship orders (SGOs) are appropriately pursued when this is the best plan to secure long-term permanence for the child with connected carers. Assessments are comprehensive and demonstrate that social workers are unafraid to hold difficult conversations with carers to ensure that decisions are based on a thorough exploration of the issues. SGO plans are equally strong for the child and carer and include support for the birth family.
24. When the plan for children is long-term foster care, timely matching takes place through the permanence panel. PIPA is used to provide carers with insights into how a child is presenting and this supports an understanding of the child's needs and promotes the stability of the placement. Children who live in children's homes are regularly consulted about their wishes and feelings. Children are seen regularly, and social workers spend individual quality time with them. Placements are regularly reviewed to ensure that these continue to meet children's changing needs.
25. Children are well looked after in their new homes, and they make good progress. Most children live in foster care or with connected carers close to home and within North Yorkshire. The small number of children who need to live at a distance from their home receive very effective care and support. They are visited in line with their needs and have access to education placements that enable them to achieve in line with their age and abilities.
26. The majority of children are placed with North Yorkshire foster carers who are trained well to develop an insightful understanding of the complexities of fostering to meet the needs of vulnerable children. Foster carers are well versed

in using the practice model effectively alongside social workers to ensure consistent practice.

27. A very small number of children are currently living in unregistered children's homes, as a last resort and when all other options have been fully explored. Regular meetings and visits are conducted to ensure that this remains a safe place for the child. Senior managers and leaders have a clear understanding of the inbuilt risks associated with these homes and provide a critical oversight of the plans to ensure that these homes are providing appropriate care. Furthermore, persistent efforts are made to search for suitable children's homes so that children are supported through the appropriate regulatory frameworks.
28. Children's care plans are comprehensive, informed by children's voices and focused on meeting their needs. Plans for children's futures are ambitious and include the support that they will receive with realistic timescales and actions for all to consider. This ensures that there are no unnecessary delays in care planning for children.
29. IROs have significant oversight of children, and their positive footprint is clearly evident on children's records. They provide appropriate challenge to planning for children when it is necessary to do so. These challenges are resolved quickly and at an informal level. There is consistently strong practice in contacting children between meetings, ensuring that children's voices are at the forefront of planning. Children's views are a priority within the review meetings, which are well attended by professionals. IROs skilfully write reviews that would enable children to understand why decisions are made about them.
30. Most children's health needs are addressed well within care planning and supported well by carers. Children are up to date with their health assessments and dental and optician appointments. Children receive tailored support with their emotional well-being, which promotes placement stability.
31. Children's hobbies and interests are prioritised, and they are provided with numerous opportunities to engage in positive activities. Social workers are creative in their thinking about how children can maintain their cultural identity, and they look at opportunities to develop links with community-based faith groups.
32. Children in care benefit from a highly effective virtual school that is ambitious for children to be successful. Virtual school staff carry out their work with care and intelligence, looking after their virtual classes. Effective personal education plans are routinely undertaken and reviewed. Staff in the virtual school are tenacious in ensuring that children get the support that they need. The 'circle of adults' allows all professionals and carers to share information about the child so that everyone knows the child's history and is fully committed to helping them be successful. This innovative approach is another way in which the virtual school is the 'bridge' between social care and knowledge in schools.

33. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported to access appropriate accommodation and education, and to pursue their religious and cultural needs. A range of specialist services to support the emotional and mental health of children is available. Foster carers are supported to develop the knowledge and skills to care for children and offer 'staying put' arrangements in recognition of the need for consistency and continued support, particularly when asylum status is still not determined. The virtual school is a strong advocate for the small number of children who are waiting for college placements as a result of age disputes. Additionally, it provides a programme of summer school education and activities for children.
34. Children in care benefit from attending a wide range of groups to express their views. Children have many opportunities to be involved in shaping and influencing service developments. They feel listened to and know how to make representations if they are not happy. They value their involvement in interview panels and feel that their views are heard with equal importance to other panel members.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

35. Care-experienced young people receive an exceptional service. North Yorkshire demonstrates an unconditional commitment to young people through its all-ages offer for care leavers, spelled out in its 'always here' approach. This ensures that care leavers have a safety net of support whenever they need it.
36. The strength-based practice model enables leaving-care workers to build strong positive relationships with young people prior to transition into adulthood. The commitment shown by workers to their young people is inspiring. They reinforce to their children and young people a 'can do' attitude. This empowers young people to believe in themselves and overcome difficulties they experience. One worker tells their young people, 'You can do it; believe in yourself as I believe in you.' Consequently, young people told inspectors that they highly value these relationships and that they feel seen and cared for.
37. Leaving-care workers support young people to develop family and community networks, helping young people to re-engage with their birth families and ensuring that they are provided with the right levels of support to enable them to live independently.
38. Workers develop an in-depth knowledge of young people's individual needs using the support of PIPA to provide insight into young people's experiences and how these present in their behaviour. This translates into highly effective planning, enabling young people to make progress in many aspects of their life. Pathway plans are individualised and aspirational and carefully consider young people's needs and the support they can access to develop their independence skills. Young people's health needs are prioritised and supported through

various universal and specialist health services, including their access to PIPA to support their emotional well-being. Workers understand the significance of young people's emotional attachments to their pets. This has led to innovative practice in enabling the registration of a dog, as an emotional support dog, which supported a young person to obtain a tenancy that had previously been denied them.

39. The local offer is comprehensive and young people's entitlements are understood by care leavers. The local offer's statutory elements are clear and accessible. Although the information about discretionary support in the written offer is less clear, there has been no detrimental impact for young people as they know they can ask for additional support at any time.
40. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers receive a high level of support, including practical and emotional well-being support. Workers are knowledgeable about access to legal support during leave to remain applications. Careful consideration is given to ensuring that young people have access to local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs. Other young people with additional vulnerabilities are well supported, particularly at times of crisis to help reduce harm, and they are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe. Those in custody are visited regularly and there are robust support plans in place for when they return to their community.
41. There is a strong emphasis on education, training and employment. Specialist workers known as 'opportunity brokers' are skilled at identifying appropriate pathways into education, training and employment. Staff in the virtual school offer work experience opportunities and visits to large employers and to universities. Apprenticeships within the council provide a well-embedded springboard to future careers.
42. Young people live in suitable accommodation. They receive the right level of support that enables them to develop their independence skills. Effective planning takes place to minimise the disruption that young people experience when they reach 18 years old. A significant number of young people benefit from 'staying put' arrangements with their foster carers, supporting them into adulthood.
43. The voice of care leavers is heard through the care champions and the corporate parenting group, which successfully influences service delivery. These forums provide children and care leavers with the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives and make a real difference to both them and other young people. Leaders are committed to celebrating young people's successes. Young people are encouraged to attend organised trips and numerous award events to recognise their achievements.

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

44. Leaders are outward-looking and have a deep understanding of local communities and what good and outstanding services for children look like. Children are placed first and foremost in the 'Being Young in North Yorkshire' vision for the safeguarding partnership. Leaders have created the conditions for social work practice to thrive through being at the forefront of practice, latest research and sector-led improvement, as well as through a faithful adherence to the chosen model of practice. The director of children's services (DCS) is forward-thinking, planning for and pre-empting reforms in the sector.
45. Leaders have introduced a wide range of creative and successful initiatives that are having a demonstrably positive impact for children and their families. Senior leaders in the service, the safeguarding partnership and political leaders have shown a resolute focus and ambition to improve the lives of children and their families. A particular strength and added value is provided by the work of PIPA, whose input is woven throughout the service, supporting carers and workers to develop a deeper understanding of children's needs, and in direct support of children.
46. The senior leadership team has provided a determined and effective focus on children and a service that evolves with changing demands and social problems. Since the last inspection, the DCS has provided stability of leadership and clarity of vision through the unprecedented public health challenges of COVID-19 and, more recently, through some changes in the senior leadership team. Collectively, leaders have ensured that the culture of wanting the best for 'our young people as we would for our own' is palpable.
47. The senior leadership team has consistently embedded a culture where the workforce think family, while continuing to be child-centred. The promotion of 'finding' families, 'seeing' and keeping them always in mind for children, is threaded through all parts of the service and other directorates. It means that there is a common language, vision and purpose leading to high-quality services across the board for children. Through the unstinting work of leaders and the safeguarding partnership, this strength-based model, with the child at the centre, is shared by partners supporting children to 'stay safe, healthy, happy and to achieve'.
48. Corporate leaders have grasped the opportunity brought by local government reorganisation in April 2023, to leverage the position of children's services in the wider council and to promote corporate parenting responsibilities. The dedicated and knowledgeable portfolio lead for children is a passionate advocate for children, providing an unwavering focus on children across the council and a sharp scrutiny of practice. Children's services are a priority evidenced through the chief executive's commitment to the protection of excellent-quality services through sustained investment. This is leading to service improvement and new

initiatives that are making a positive difference to children's lives. An authentic value base of care and compassion is exemplified in the notable open-door all-ages offer, 'always here', for care leavers, who can access advice and support whenever they need it.

49. The corporate parenting group is an effective champion for children and care leavers in North Yorkshire. Care champions (the name given to the children-in-care and care leavers' councils) are an impressive and vocal group of young people who are making a highly positive contribution to service developments. Children's voices are embedded throughout the service, from the contribution they make to their own plans, right through to how they influence transformation of services. Children and care leavers told inspectors that they are confident that, when they raise issues, they will be listened to, and their views acted on. They also said that they valued their workers and the difference social care intervention has made to their lives.
50. Strategic partnerships are mature and able to withstand mutual challenge. Leaders have proactively supported partners to make identified improvements to their response to children and have worked closely with the judiciary to improve timeliness of care proceedings to mitigate the impact of delay for children.
51. Skilled social workers, practitioners and leaving-care workers are enthusiastic proponents of relational practice based on trusting professional relationships to effect change. They are highly committed, demonstrate a depth of understanding of their children and families, and light up with pride when talking about children.
52. Leaders have ensured that children's needs for family connections remain an imperative. This is ensuring that children are supported to live successfully and safely within their family wherever possible. When children need to come into care, there has been a resolute and successful approach to sufficiency which is enabling the vast majority of children to live with North Yorkshire foster carers.
53. Governance arrangements are extremely robust, with a golden thread of reporting at team and service level to the senior leadership team, corporate leaders and elected members. This ensures clear lines of accountability. Leaders provide an agile response to investigate data performance anomalies. A whole-system approach to performance management and quality assurance has enabled a comprehensive line of sight to practice and an accurate understanding of quality. Leaders have continued to improve their tests of assurance through an extensive range of audit activity, practice weeks and observation of practice, data analysis, quarterly appreciative enquiry panels, learning from complaints, and feedback from partners, children, families and practitioners.
54. Learning from audit activity, known as learning spaces, is used well to inform and improve service developments and practice. Leaders concurred with

inspectors about some areas of their auditing practice that could be further improved. Leaders are currently in the process of implementing these improvements. Throughout the inspection, senior leaders were reflective and responsive to inspection findings. Consequently, they have immediately introduced a strengthened response at the professional advice line in the MAST and intend to tighten recorded manager oversight of the PLO and letters before proceedings.

55. The workforce is relatively stable and the vast majority of social workers are permanent employees. Nevertheless, there is a continued focus on recruitment and retention of frontline managers and social workers. This ensures that children are benefiting from stable and trusting relationships with a consistent worker. Workloads are carefully monitored, and are mostly manageable, providing additional opportunities for relational social work practice. As a result, children benefit from a wide range of creative direct work that enables them to understand their circumstances and improves their safety. Social workers spoke with a genuine care and compassion for children. They told inspectors that they are immensely proud to work for North Yorkshire, and that they feel valued and appreciated by their senior managers.



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