

Inspection of Northumberland County Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 May 2024

Lead inspector: Andy Waugh, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the last ILACS inspection in 2020, services to children who need help, support and care in Northumberland have improved. Children benefit from high-quality social work practice that improves their lives. The highly impressive children's services senior leadership team has provided stability in times of challenge and instability in the wider council. They have embedded a shared vision with political leaders and across the whole council to make things better for children and their families. Senior leaders have a firm grip on frontline practice and a thorough understanding of the strengths and areas for further development. Highly effective approaches to performance management and quality assurance monitor how their ambitious plans ensure that children consistently have positive experiences. These plans are underpinned by strong multi-agency partnerships that place children at the forefront of planning, along with significant financial support.

Most areas of practice have improved since the last inspection. The highly effective family hubs are providing early help interventions that improve children's experiences. The firmly embedded strength-based model across the partnership is supporting family and friends networks and is resulting in more families finding their

own safe solutions to difficulties. Strong pre-proceedings are enabling more children to remain in appropriate kinship care arrangements. Care-experienced young people's views are valued, and they are meaningfully engaged in recruitment and shaping services.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of written plans and records of management oversight to fully reflect the quality of social practice and the impact on children's experiences.

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

1. Children in Northumberland receive a highly effective response when they are referred into the 'front door'/multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Partnership working is consistently strong, and children are appropriately referred into the front door by partner agencies. All contacts are thoroughly considered by social workers. Social workers are rigorous in gaining parental consent to gather further information which is proportionate and relevant to the areas of need and risk being presented.
2. Thresholds are well understood across the partnership, and this helps to ensure that children receive the right service according to their needs. Practitioners use the information provided to determine any issues of need and risks, and carefully consider these against any historical and known information. Team managers' decision-making is clear, providing staff with appropriate case direction to ensure children receive the right level of support.
3. Children who are exposed to domestic abuse receive a highly effective response. Daily meetings provide a multi-agency consideration of risk, with an immediate safeguarding response if needed. Well-established links to community organisations enable adult and child victims of domestic abuse to access the support directly when this is required. A well-coordinated partnership initiative to address domestic abuse means that schools are made aware of police notifications, providing additional oversight of children and offer additional support when needed.
4. There is an effective process to transfer children's cases to the early help First Contact from the triage service in the front door. Well-informed decisions, overseen by managers, are made as to who is the best person to support the family and what the next steps are. Management oversight and supervision in the front door and MASH is regular and is effective in progressing children's plans.
5. Family help workers in the multi-agency family hubs support children to make positive improvements. Early help assessments are detailed and thorough. Children's contributions are noted to highlight their views in their own words. Plans are based on what children say is important to them where appropriate.

The multi-agency co-located family hubs are committed to supporting families at the earliest opportunity, providing help within their communities. When the work of family help is drawing to an end, the family are supported to receive continued support from universal services. As a result of this work, the vast majority of children have positive experiences and make good progress. When concerns escalate, family help managers appropriately refer children to the triage service. Joint working ensures a seamless handover to children's social care where required.

6. The emergency duty team is a well-established team that responds appropriately to concerns that arise out of hours. Children receive a rapid response when there are clear safeguarding concerns.
7. When safeguarding concerns are identified, decisions to progress to strategy meetings are timely and appropriate. These meetings are well attended by relevant partner agencies. The strength-based model of practice is deeply rooted with partners, who fully contribute to the analysis of risks. Safety planning is at the forefront of next steps, with children being visited immediately if there are high levels of safeguarding concerns. Partners have a determined focus on using family networks where children need to be safeguarded in the short term while investigations are being completed.
8. During child protection enquiries, children are routinely seen alone where appropriate. Their views inform assessments and provide workers with a sense of the child's experiences, leading to children receiving the right levels of support. Senior managers provide strong oversight and challenge when children are subject to child protection enquiries, reviewing progress and decision-making to ensure timely progression.
9. For children who require an assessment, social workers apply the model of relationship-based practice, which is clearly reflected in their work. There is a strong analysis of strengths, needs and risk, leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. Assessments are enriched by skilled direct work with children. Social workers use creative means such as the child's voice tablet to help workers gain a good understanding of their experiences. Assessments consistently focus on the family network to identify what support is available. If necessary, assessments consider whether children can be safely cared for in kinship arrangements and within their community.
10. Initial child protection conferences are timely and are well attended by professionals and parents. Decision-making is informed by effective multi-agency information-sharing and detailed contributions from parents. This helps to assess the impact for the child and to influence safety planning. The next steps are discussed within the meeting and families are clear on what will happen next and what needs to change.

11. The vast majority of children's plans are up to date and consistently address children's needs and experiences. Plans consistently involve the child's network and set clear actions for the professionals and the family. For a very small number of children, actions in plans do not have specific timescales for completion or to monitor progress. As a consequence, some parents may not be aware of what is expected of them and by when.
12. The majority of children's plans are reviewed at regular meetings, which are well attended by parents and professionals who contribute to the discussion. Partners work well together through core group attendance to identify and monitor risk. Ongoing or emerging risk is captured and responded to well to ensure that children are safeguarded, and their needs are met.
13. Children consistently benefit from effective work within the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Senior managers take responsibility through weekly meetings to monitor children's progress. Children and their families receive high levels of support, and assessments are routinely undertaken within pre-proceedings to ensure that children are safeguarded, and care proceedings are avoided where possible. This ensures that work with families is proportionate. The creative exploration of family networks ensures that alternative arrangements can be made when children cannot safely live with their parents.
14. When it is not safe for children to remain living with their families, timely care proceedings are initiated. The highly effective work completed in pre-proceedings ensures that permanence decisions for children are achieved in a timescale that meets their needs. The skilled work from the pre-birth assessment team enables more children to be assessed quickly, supporting decisions for them to remain within their birth family or move to early permanence following birth.
15. Disabled children are supported by specialist workers who have excellent insight into their needs and experiences. Visits to children are regular and workers develop positive relationships with children and carers. They are highly skilled in using a variety of communication tools to gather children's wishes. Workers are holistic in their approach, including brothers and sisters, and ensure that agencies and services are helping parents to meet the needs of all children in their family.
16. Children who go missing from home and in care, and those at risk of exploitation, receive a very effective multi-agency response from workers in the Adolescent Service. Skilled workers provide reflective, child-centred consultations, with children's allocated workers working alongside them when required, to provide added value and a flexibility in approach. As a result of this, risks to children are addressed through an effective coordinated response from partners. Return home interviews are timely and detailed and show an understanding of children's experiences. The intelligence from these interviews is shared across the multidisciplinary team to inform what actions need to be taken to keep children safe. This high level of oversight ensures that children continue to work with

people who know them and who are well informed about contributing risk factors. As a result, risks to children are managed and mitigated.

17. When young people present as homeless as 16- and 17-year-olds to the local authority, they receive a comprehensive response. Wherever possible, children are supported to remain within family networks. If this is not possible, workers complete holistic assessments that identify the levels of support needed. Children are fully informed of their rights and entitlements, with all accommodation options explored, including the option of becoming cared for. An effective joint housing protocol supports workers to help children who are homeless and at risk of becoming homeless.
18. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service ensures that allegations against staff and carers are thoroughly investigated and responded to in a timely way. The LADO is tenacious in following up actions and holding others to account. The comprehensive reporting tools in the service allow managers to track individual cases alongside identifying trends.
19. For children who are electively home educated or missing from education there is a strong multi-agency response. Clear guidance is in place to ensure that parents who choose to electively home educate their child are aware of what this entails. Children who are missing education are tracked closely through a monthly panel meeting, and swift action is taken to ensure that those children who repeatedly appear on the missing education list are returned to full-time education as soon as possible.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

20. Decisions for children to enter care are timely and appropriate for most children. Senior managers provide scrutiny and challenge, with legal advice being appropriately used to inform their decisions at the legal gateway panel. Children's records show a clear rationale for the decision, which means children reviewing their records later in their lives would understand why decisions were made about them.
21. Children's reviews involve the people who are important to them. Meetings are well attended by parents, partners and kinship networks. Children are encouraged to attend, and where they choose not to attend, their views are shared by social workers and advocates.
22. Children are consistently visited by their independent reviewing officer (IRO) before their cared for reviews to directly gain their wishes and feelings. Most reviews take place within timescale. Although the majority of children and families are aware of the long-term goals, for a very small number of children, minutes reflect actions for the 'here and now' but not consistently the longer-term outcomes.

23. The quality of direct work is impressive. Social workers build meaningful relationships with children consistently using direct tools to gather their views and help them understand why decisions have been made. This practice is embedded in their work to give children a voice and to support children to communicate in a variety of ways and express themselves.
24. Family networks are used well to support children to remain in their family where appropriate. Social workers provide strong oversight to help families problem-solve together. For a very small number of children, when their arrangements within their family network break down, too much dependency is left with the family to resolve the crisis. For a small number of children this has led to several placement moves with different family members and a lack of a clear, coherent longer-term plan for their future.
25. Children are supported to keep in touch with important people in their lives. Family time arrangements are in line with children's needs and are reviewed and changed when required. This helps children to maintain links to their family that support their sense of identity and strengthen significant relationships.
26. The quality of written plans does not always reflect the high quality of social work practice that helps children progress. For some children, parts of the written plan are blank and do not sufficiently address cultural, identity or emotional health needs. Social workers are able to articulate the progress children have made and clearly understand children's experiences. However, this is not consistently recorded. Where care plans are more effective, they reflect children's needs and experiences and bring alive the child's voice through the child's records.
27. Social workers report that they have regular supervision. However, this is not consistently recorded, and it is unclear how managers have oversight to ensure that plans are progressing. Leaders know there is more to do to improve the quality and consistency of supervision across the services.
28. Cared for children who participate in 'Voices Making Choices' feel listened to by leaders. They speak proudly of their work producing a video about stigmatising language and representing Northumberland children in Parliament. They are seeing some initial impact in how their work is influencing language used by their social workers and carers. The participation group is well established, with purposeful work continuing, including their development of The Placement Game and Northumberland Promise, helping senior leaders understand cared for children's experiences.
29. Children are well supported to ensure that their health needs are addressed. They consistently attend their initial and review health assessments. The vast majority of children have annual dental assessments, and most children have strengths and difficulties questionnaires completed. This results in children's health and emotional needs being identified early and action taken to make improvements.

30. A wide range of professionals work collaboratively within the virtual school to ensure that children receive the most appropriate support with their education. Careful consideration is given to how the virtual school is staffed. Qualified teachers are employed to work directly with children in schools. The local authority is determined to try and ensure stability for children and improve their attendance at school so that they achieve well. When children are not achieving as well as they should, senior leaders and the virtual school take action to help them catch up. Teachers have been deployed to residential homes to provide additional support for children. A thematic audit on the experiences of children is under way to identify what resources are required.
31. Children are encouraged to participate in activities outside of the home by their carers. Children living with foster carers benefit from the friendships that they form through social activities.
32. Permanence options are routinely considered for children who are cared for so that they can be clear about who they will live with while they are in the local authority's care. There is a strong emphasis by senior managers on permanence for children, and their oversight, alongside highly effective pre-proceedings work, ensures that permanence planning is timely, providing children with security at the earliest opportunity.
33. Most children leave care in a planned way, with many via special guardianship orders (SGOs). Carers have strong SGO support from the kinship team. They are appropriately assessed financially and are supported with ongoing family time arrangements, which promotes placement stability.
34. Decisions for children on a care order to return to live with their parents are carefully considered and planned with oversight from senior managers and independent scrutiny by the family court and IROs. Where this is the agreed plan, support is put in place for parents to care safely for their children and help them make good progress. Social workers are proactive in ending care orders when they are no longer required.
35. Foster carers are supported well. They have access to support groups and can attend a good variety of training. Furthermore, foster carers build support networks and relationships with other foster families. This builds a community around the child and extended foster family relationships.
36. Effective working relationships with the regional adoption agency (Adoption North East) ensure that children are appropriately placed with adoptive carers in a timely way. Children have their adoption needs met through effective working relationships with the regional adoption agency. Children are appropriately matched to adoptive carers in a timely way.
37. Children receive later life letters that provide a comprehensive overview of the child's history. Children who are adopted and in long-term foster care receive life-

story books which are detailed and sensitively written. The books provide a realistic account of the child's early events, striking a balance between times of sadness, happiness and progress. This helps children to understand significant events in their lives and the decisions made by family and professionals.

38. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children make good progress from their point of entering care. Children told inspectors about the support they receive and the positive relationships with their workers. They told inspectors that they feel confident to share any worries they have. Children are supported to develop skills to live independently and have healthy lives. Children's education and aspirations are promoted, and they are supported to secure their legal status where possible.
39. A small number of children live in unregistered children's homes who are monitored through weekly meetings. Senior managers maintain a strong oversight and a deep understanding of the children's needs, consideration of the placement's appropriateness and plans for moving the child into regulated provision. There is a relentless drive to secure regulated homes for children, often drawing on the wider multi-agency partnership to ensure that all identified needs are considered, and suitable homes can be found.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

40. Care-experienced young people benefit from timely allocation of leaving care workers (LCWs) within the Northumberland Adolescent Service (NAS). Their workers maintain strong relationships with their young people as they progress into adulthood until they are at least 21 years, and if needed up to 25 years. Care-experienced young people are visited frequently by their LCWs in line with individual needs or where risks are escalating. For the very small number of care-experienced young people who are not in touch with the NAS, there is a tenacious approach to attempting contact to re-engage with them.
41. The co-location of health, drugs and alcohol partners within the NAS provides an invaluable support for young people transitioning to adult services at a time which is right to meet their individual needs.
42. Care-experienced young people maintain links with family and those who are important to them. LCWs take time to get to know these networks and provide young people with additional support where necessary.
43. There are a wide range of participation opportunities available to care-experienced young people. They have been involved meaningfully in the recruitment process for senior leaders. Some have attended regional and national care leavers events, which has contributed to service development. Leaders are committed to continuing to represent the voice of the care-experienced young person to develop the service further.

The response to health and emotional well-being is good. Care-experienced young people are registered with doctors and access support to meet their physical and mental health needs. LCWs are strong advocates for young people and accompany them to appointments if requested. Young people told inspectors of the challenges in accessing dental treatment. Senior leaders are alert to this area of concern and are developing a dental pathway with health colleagues, enabling swifter access to services. Some care-experienced young people do not have their full health histories, meaning some do not have a full understanding of their health needs.

44. LCWs support young people to access their entitlements. The young people who spoke to inspectors said that they are clear about most aspects of the local offer but there were gaps in their full understanding. This was mainly in relation to having an allocated LCW and what services are available post-21 years. A small number of young people expressed a concern that the gym and travel passes within the care leaver's covenant are not as generous as experienced by their peers in other local authorities. While the local authority does offer further support around gym costs, clothing and equipment, this is not fully or widely understood by the young people.
45. Young people are involved in the formulation of pathway plans. Their views about the future are therefore considered, resulting in plans which are targeted to individual needs. Their plans are reviewed regularly and therefore reflect their current circumstances. Pathway plans are focused on what support young people need to achieve their goals. LCWs provide young people with high levels of support and are effective at engaging partners to improve young people's experiences. However, this high-quality practice is not consistently reflected in written plans. Care-experienced young people have the key documents, including their National Insurance number, birth certificate and passport, that they need to give them control over their lives as adults.
46. Young people are helped to keep themselves safe from harm. LCWs provide strong support to those at risk of exploitation. There is effective multi-agency oversight where there are concerns about the safety of young people who are missing.
47. Young people who sought asylum as children continue to be fully supported into adulthood. They maintain strong links with places of worship and culturally matched social groups.
48. When care-experienced young people enter custody, LCWs continue to support them through visits every two months and additional telephone contact. When requests for personal items or financial support are made, LCWs respond quickly, ensuring young people receive support in a timely way.
49. LCWs are committed to helping young people access education, employment or training. Careers advisers within the virtual school offer effective advice and

support to care-experienced young people. They have formed strong links with local further education providers and businesses, with a guaranteed number of apprentice placements and support to get ready for employment. As a result, there are more care-experienced young people accessing education, employment or training. LCWs continue to encourage care leavers who are not in education, employment or training to meet their careers officer and consider their career aspirations.

50. Most care-experienced young people are living in suitable accommodation. They receive the right levels of support that enable them to develop their independence skills, without becoming reliant on staff. NAS has developed positive relationships with housing providers who are able to offer a range of accommodation.

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

51. At the last judgement inspection in 2020, children's services were judged to be good in all areas. Since that time, there have been significant corporate challenges within Northumberland County Council which led to multiple changes in the executive and senior leadership team. Through a special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) inspection in July 2021, and a focused visit in August 2022, it was clear that despite these challenges, stability of services for children was not negatively impacted. This was due to high-quality leadership within children's services that protected children's services, secured additional funding, developed and improved services. Despite the instability, children's services leaders maintained a relentless focus on improving experiences for children and their families. They have worked collaboratively with partners and staff to sustain and facilitate improvements.

52. The children's senior leadership team is now permanent following the service being stabilised with joint directors of children's services from May 2022 and the permanent appointment of the current director of children's services in January 2023. Children's services leaders have developed strong and effective working relationships to ensure that children are a priority across the whole council. This has led to significant investment in children's services, enabling the development of the multi-agency co-located family hubs, a high-quality pre-birth assessment team supporting early permanence decisions and a front door that has partners firmly embedded and is a strong example of working together to support children and families.

53. A well-developed, competently led safeguarding partnership for children and adults has broken down barriers, enabling services to work together effectively and provide holistic services. Senior leaders have fully engaged partners and have shown a clear commitment to the family hubs, recognising the importance of early help intervention. The development of multi-agency services in the exemplary NAS enables cared for children and care-experienced young people to

access a wide range of services, including emotional well-being support. The family courts and Cafcass provided very positive feedback about the relationship with senior leaders and the predominantly strong practice. The designated family judge commented on the high-quality pre-proceedings work which has led to early permanence decisions for children being secured with timescales for completion at 25 weeks.

54. Mature relationships and strong strategic planning across the local authority enable senior leaders to draw on other services to support children and their families. Senior leaders proactively seek feedback from families, children, staff and partner agencies. They actively implement changes as a result of feedback where needed. During this inspection, inspectors have been able to see where improvements have been embedded, such as the impact of the pre-birth team in pre-proceedings, supporting early permanence decision-making. As this is part of a continual improvement process, inspectors were also able to see other strategic plans in progress but where it is too early to assess impact.
55. Senior leaders are actively implementing changes in keeping with children's social care reforms. The strong focus on family networks and kinship care is having tangible benefits on many children's overall experiences. The impact for children is evident, as within the last 12 months high numbers of children are remaining safely in kinship care arrangements through SGOs and investment in family support.
56. Senior leaders and elected members take their responsibilities for corporate parenting very seriously. They work cohesively and are bound by a shared vision and ambition to provide the best for children and young people and to give them the greatest opportunity to achieve and have positive experiences. There is a high level of meaningful participation from children and care-experienced young people which influences the development of children's services. Children and care-experienced young people are engaged in a wide range of participation groups that inform the corporate parenting board of their views on services and practice. Their voices are valued and heard. Some children told inspectors that they are able to describe how they feel and consider that the adults in their lives are genuinely proud of them and their achievements. The message from care-experienced young people is, 'Keep doing what you are doing, you're doing mint.'
57. Senior leaders are acutely aware of the ongoing challenges they continue to face. The need for sufficiency of local homes for their cared for children has resulted in significant financial commitment to invest in building local children's homes to support children to remain close to home.
58. Senior leaders know their service well and have excellent oversight of frontline practice. The self-assessment and strategic plan are comprehensive documents which reflect what inspectors found during this inspection. Central to the approach was open, honest and transparent evaluation of their strengths and where further development is needed. There is a strong emphasis on celebrating

successes and how experiences have improved for a high number of children. Most importantly, the self-assessment reflected very well how senior leaders understand the needs of families in Northumberland and how they encourage external scrutiny that enhances their learning culture.

59. A comprehensive quality assurance framework supports leaders' ethos of a strong learning culture. Practice days, case auditing and a wide range of quality assurance activities are undertaken collaboratively with staff, including sampling of case records, which provides senior leaders with a strong line of sight on practice. This gives senior leaders assurances that the right decisions are being made for children and enables leaders to develop future services to meet the needs of their children.
60. The senior leadership team is responsive when areas of need arise. The development of the multi-agency Northumberland Emotional Wellbeing Support Team (NEWST) provides support to practitioners and carers, promoting placement stability and school attendance. The investment in, and introduction of, the pre-birth team has had a significant and positive impact on children and families.
61. Leaders have demonstrated their commitment to staff through the leadership pledge, placing a high value on developing and empowering staff, providing them with development opportunities and visible leadership. Leaders have successfully embedded a culture that inspires staff to practice creatively and puts children at the centre of all they do.
62. The recruitment and retention of a skilled, experienced workforce is a priority to facilitate the drive to continually improve children's experience. Senior leaders are continually developing innovative strategies to address this. They have developed many streams to recruit and retain staff, with a strong emphasis of 'grow your own' through their successful social work academy. Many social workers have progressed through the social work academy, which is a real strength. The stability of the workforce and high-quality social work practice enables children to build sustained relationships with workers who provide consistent support.
63. Social workers are well supported by managers. They report being able to work in a culture that values them as individuals and supports them in their practice. Senior leaders are highly visible and engage with staff through practice days and regular newsletters. The majority of staff have a strong sense of belonging and enjoy working in Northumberland. While some caseloads are high, workers report a positive work-life balance. Social workers have a range of training opportunities available to them. These opportunities enable social workers to develop new skills which provide them with additional tools to support their work with families as well as supporting their professional development.

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