

Inspection of City of York Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 24 February 2025 to 7 March 2025

Lead inspector: Rachel Fairhurst, 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 ILACS inspection in 2022, there has been a change in the senior leadership team, including the Corporate Director. A relentless drive by senior leaders has led to significant improvements, on a considerable scale, in the standard and quality of services to children. There has been a determined focus and emphasis on improving practice, through the implementation and embedding of a bespoke practice framework, which has improved support, services and interventions.

The unwavering commitment to workforce stability has allowed the development of skilled workers and improved management oversight. Ambitious and accessible senior leaders have driven improved practice across all service areas, creating consistent delivery of good experiences and progress for children. There is an unrelenting concentration and focus on children remaining within their kinship networks, and their voices are pivotal to planning and decision-making.

There are some identified pockets of practice areas, affecting a very small number of children, that could be further strengthened. Leaders were aware of these and had credible plans in place.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of assessments and plans for disabled children, reflecting their identity and the impact on their lived experience. Enabler three: National Framework.
- The continued timely update of pathway plans for care leavers, where appropriate, when their needs or circumstances change. Enabler three: National Framework.

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

1. The integrated front door (IFD) provides a timely and effective response. Referrals into the IFD are appropriate and thresholds are well understood and applied. There is a thorough understanding of the need for parental consent, and when it may be required to be appropriately dispensed with. Practitioners are experienced and express professional curiosity. Contacts are promptly allocated, and thorough enquiries are undertaken to determine the most appropriate outcome. Workers seek to understand children's experiences and a range of children's diverse needs relating to their identity, ensuring that this information is well recorded.
2. Early help is a highly effective service. The integration of early help coordinators within the IFD ensures that, for most children and families, the response for early help is prompt and cohesive. Partners understand thresholds, resulting in requests for early help that are appropriate and clear. Early help assessments are proportionate and reflect children's needs, leading to clear plans that effect change for children. Workers understand the value that family networks bring and are confident and consistent in exploring these. When children's needs escalate, there is appropriate 'step up' for social work support.
3. When referrals identify safeguarding concerns, further information is requested by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Responses from the MASH are timely and ensure that the right decisions are made for children. This includes responses to domestic abuse and child exploitation, which are well considered and understood. Decision-making is in line with children's needs and includes clear rationale and detailed manager oversight.
4. The emergency duty team (EDT) provides a robust response to children and families in the evenings and weekends. Joint working with the police enables strategy meetings and joint visits to take place when required to ensure children's welfare. Effective safety planning and use of family networks assist in safeguarding children, through considered support and informal kinship care if required. Consistent information-sharing with daytime services facilitates a successful continuation of support to children and families.

5. When safeguarding concerns arise for children, multi-agency strategy meetings are swiftly held and well attended by partner agencies. Detailed information-sharing informs decision-making. Clear actions and next steps are identified and inform thorough child protection enquiries. Children are routinely spoken to, with detailed recordings of children's experiences to inform next steps.
6. Assessments are completed in the time frame needed for individual children. Social workers gather comprehensive information and analyse historical information and risks well, including in pre-birth assessments. Purposeful visits are undertaken to children and their families to ascertain their wishes and feelings, to help understand children's lived experiences. This includes non-resident parents and consideration of the impact of cultural difference in their communities. Highly effective assessments lead to positive experiences and progress for children, as well as robust plans that improve their circumstances.
7. Children are being identified as young carers, and the majority benefit from a commissioned service that supports them by providing group activities and mentoring. Young carers who are open for child-in-need and child protection planning do not currently benefit from accessing this service.
8. The embedded practice model ensures that family networks are considered at an early stage, and this is a real strength. Families are enabled to come together to explore how they can work together to improve children's lives, through family group decision-making meetings. This gives families an opportunity to find solutions themselves, which informs current and future planning. Children are supported by those that know them well, and plans are strengthened by family networks who have access to, and relationships with, the children.
9. Effective multi-agency meetings are well attended by children's professional and family networks. The quality of child-in-need and child protection planning is strong, with a clear focus on the voice of children. The large majority of plans contain clear contingency planning, which ensures parents are clear on the expectations on them.
10. When needed, children proceed to an initial child protection conference (ICPC), and there is consistently good partner agency and parental attendance and engagement. There is a clear analysis of past concerns and current risks within these meetings and core groups. The voices of children and parents are captured well in these records.
11. Child protection chair oversight on children's records reflects the detailed and effective oversight of progress of plans for children. This is informed by meetings with social workers and visits to children, including at midway reviews. While there is a very small number of children for whom child protection planning could have been strengthened, for the vast majority, risk is managed effectively through a well-coordinated multi-agency response.

12. Children are supported to have meaningful relationships with their social workers, who visit regularly, which helps them build trust and engage in support. Children benefit from high-quality direct work provided by insightful social workers. This includes disabled children.
13. Disabled children who receive help and protection benefit from an effective service. Various communication aids are used to gather their wishes and feelings, and these inform planning and next steps, ensuring that children get the support they need at the right time. Social workers and partners understand the needs and risks of these children. For a very small number of disabled children, child-in-need plans are insufficiently timebound in their actions.
14. Children at risk of exploitation, including those in care, benefit from cohesive multi-agency working. Skilled social workers fully understand children's past experiences and vulnerabilities. Risk assessments thoroughly capture risks and wider needs. They are frequently updated and overseen by managers. A strength is social workers' ability to ensure that the family network is supported by including previously absent parents and friends into safety planning, along with capturing and monitoring the wealth of intelligence from 'places and spaces'. This is enabling an understanding of children's wider experiences and is helping to reduce levels of harm.
15. When children go missing from home or care, there is strong oversight and coordination to determine their whereabouts with partners, parents and carers to facilitate children's safe return. Children's views and risks relating to going missing from home or care are captured and analysed well by a range of professionals, including social workers. Return home interviews (RHIs) are persistently offered, and when completed, they are thorough and child centred. Take up of RHIs is low. However, children speak to their designated workers, with whom they have a relationship. Increased analysis, understanding and effective work with children previously at high risk of going missing from home have prevented further episodes of going missing, thus reducing risk.
16. When children's lives are not improving, most children benefit from clear decisions to escalate into the pre-proceeding stage of the public law outline (PLO). The PLO process is appropriately applied, and family networks are considered early. Effective front loading of assessments and clear management oversight are leading to timely decisions for children. Letters before proceedings are detailed, clear and identify actions needed to prevent an escalation to family court proceedings.
17. Children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless receive a very strong and robust offer that meets their needs. Senior leaders have worked closely with housing partners to address this area of weakness identified at the last inspection. There is now a range of suitable accommodation to meet these children's needs. Children are helped to understand their rights through repeated, explicitly recorded offers of advocacy support. Support is offered to

children when their living arrangements are fragile at home and is in place to help reunification or proactively prevent further breakdown, where possible.

18. The numbers of children who are privately fostered are small and, while there have been improvements in this area, further development is required. A multi-agency steering group and integrated working arrangements are in place, and children's social care is appropriately targeting notifications and raising awareness to address this.
19. The local authority designated officer service provides a highly effective response to allegations made against professionals working with children. It provides bespoke training and raises awareness with professional agencies to increase safeguards for children.
20. There are clear processes for schools to follow when parents notify them of their intention to electively home educate. When pupils move to home education, leaders make appropriate checks to ensure that vulnerable children's welfare is monitored effectively. If pupils go missing from education, the workers make every attempt to locate them. This includes contacting external agencies, such as border force.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

21. Cared for children receive a high-quality service from workers who know them exceptionally well and encourage them to aspire for their future. These relationships enable workers to fully respond to children's individual and unique needs. Many children do well and are settled where they live.
22. There is a determined commitment to children remaining with their families, if it is safe for them to do so. Effective use of family networking is making a difference to children. A growing number of children in care in York are living with people important to them. This helps to enhance their sense of identity and belonging.
23. York has a relatively low rate of children coming into care. Decisions for children to enter care are appropriate, mostly timely and only when it is in the child's interests to do so. Feedback from the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) was positive, and leaders meet with the judiciary on a regular basis. Good-quality evidence and assessments to court means that legal proceedings are concluding in a timely manner, which is providing children with some certainty in their lives.
24. There has been significant focus on strengthening permanence planning for children, including the creation of a belonging panel. The combination of various tracking mechanisms and processes helps to ensure that almost all children in care now have a permanence plan by the second review. For those children who do not have a formal plan, there is a clear rationale provided and ongoing work to ensure greater stability. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) bring

additional scrutiny by monitoring the arrangements for permanence and driving plans forward. When it is not possible for children to remain living with their parents, alternative permanence options are considered early, resulting in children achieving stability and security as soon as possible.

25. Children leave care at a time that is right for them. The decision is well considered and carefully assessed. A growing number of children leave care to return home to parents or to live within extended kinship network. The support of these arrangements ensures that they are sustainable. These important moves are carefully assessed, and the trajectory plan is overseen effectively by the IRO. The oversight and recording of the decision-making around exiting care is clear.
26. Permanence through adoption is achieved for children when it is in their best interests. There is early planning for children who have a very low chance of remaining in the care of birth families. Social workers start family finding early, and some children have benefited from permanence at the earliest opportunity by living in foster for adoption homes. When social workers have identified adoptive families, they undertake thoughtful and considerate work with the children and the adopters in preparation for transitions.
27. For children living with connected kinship carers, there is timely consideration of achieving legal permanence via special guardianship orders. This is strengthened by the persistent direction and oversight of the IROs. Highly effective support ensures that children successfully secure legal permanence and do not remain in receipt of social work interventions for longer than is necessary.
28. The decisions for children to be in a placement with parents arrangement are carefully considered, thoroughly assessed, supported and well planned. There is thorough management oversight and ongoing consideration to the appropriateness of arrangements, or to progress towards discharge of the care order when possible.
29. The majority of children in care live in stable fostering homes, where they are thriving. When the plan for children is long-term foster care, timely matching takes place through the permanence panel, ensuring security and belonging through stable homes. Children are supported well to remain in homes that meet their needs. When there is a risk of a home breaking down, a range of interventions are utilised to support the placement, preventing the need for children to move, and disruption is kept to a minimum.
30. Most children in residential children's homes are making progress. Social workers actively gather children's views to ascertain that they are happy where they live. Effective joint working between social workers and residential staff meets identified need. When children are placed in residential provision, but this is not their long-term plan, careful thought is given to children's needs, which helps progress towards homes aligned with their plans. There is regular planning and

review at the 'Make York Home' panel. Placement information requests are ongoing and careful consideration is given to moving forward with planning.

31. Children are visited regularly, and social workers spend meaningful time with them, to talk about the things that matter to children. Children who are placed at a distance are also visited regularly and have good relationships with their workers. Visit records are written to the child using a 'narrative' style of writing. These records are detailed and would give children a real sense of this period, should they read their records.
32. Children are consistently engaged in creative, age-appropriate direct work, based on their interests, that fully explores their wishes and feelings. The high quality of this work enables children to confidently talk about important and sensitive issues, leading to informed, child-focused and collaborative care planning. The children have a full picture of their family background and identity, and the work increases their sense of belonging. Life-story work is thoughtfully planned around life events and any identified therapeutic needs. It is not seen as a 'one-off' event, but is continually revisited throughout a child's life and at key developmental stages, ensuring that the child has an understanding of their life history.
33. There is high-quality care planning for children in care, which results in them having the opportunity to thrive. Planning is dynamic and child focused, and at a pace that meets the child's needs. Care plans are informed by thorough, up-to-date assessments of children's needs, including transition planning. A child-friendly care plan represents children's views. There is early and effective consideration and preparation for transition to adulthood for children, including those with disabilities or significant mental health needs.
34. The assessments of disabled children in care provide a detailed and mostly up-to-date understanding of the children's needs. The sections relating to children's identity did not always address the uniqueness of being a disabled child and what this means for them and their needs. While workers could articulate this, it is not always clearly reflected in the recording and care plans. Visits are in line with children's needs, although some are brief and lack purpose for a small number of children.
35. IROs provide strong oversight and review the progress of children's plans, including scrutiny between review meetings. They visit children between their reviews to ensure an effective review of the plans. Children attend their reviews, and their voices are a key focus of meetings. Children in care reviews are well attended and minutes are written with care and regard, using a strength-based approach, which praises achievements and progress.
36. The virtual school understands the importance of regular school attendance, and this is a feature of children's personal education plans (PEPs). While the quality of some PEPs could be strengthened, the virtual school works well with schools.

Most cared for children typically make good educational progress from their starting points.

37. Children benefit from a range of hobbies and interests. These expand children's opportunities, increase confidence and skills and enable children to have fun, while building their social networks.
38. Children's health needs are well met. Children are registered with the relevant health agencies and supported to attend appointments when needed. Children's emotional and mental health needs are monitored, and timely responses are provided if needs arise, preventing escalation. When required, children are referred to specialist services that address their needs. Some children are supported through the in-house consultant psychologist, who provides a therapeutic response, addressing trauma and improving outcomes.
39. Children are supported to spend quality time with their family and maintain links with those that are important to them. Where appropriate, children stay overnight with relatives for family time and meet with cousins, brothers and sisters. Social workers routinely explore children's family links and actively support children to spend time with family they have lost touch with, increasing and maintaining networks.
40. There is an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in York. To meet the needs of these children, leaders have developed a specific provision, where children with similar needs are given the opportunity to share a home with others who have similar life experiences, cultural and religious needs. This shared understanding at a time of displacement is powerful and increases a sense of community and networks for these children, who are otherwise potentially alone. This reduces fear and loneliness and allows bonds to form between these children. Inspectors met with some children living there who have been well supported and are making progress.
41. A very small number of children live in unregistered children's homes arrangements. When children live in these settings, there is strong management oversight and increased scrutiny, with bespoke reporting and increased visits. Children only remain in these settings for a short period of time until alternative registered settings are identified.
42. Participation and engagement with children and young people is a real strength and has been pivotal in informing decisions and plans for individual children and service-wide development. This has developed and improved considerably since the last inspection. Children have a solid influence in shaping the local authority's provision of services through contact with corporate parenting advisers, participation groups, engagement events and attendance at the corporate parenting board. Children and young people told inspectors that they feel listened to and valued.

43. The local authority is on a comprehensive journey of fostering service development. A structured process of change is underway, supported by well-defined plans to increase the number of foster carers and choice of homes for children. While significant work remains, the local authority has made some positive improvements, with early signs of progress made. There is a clear understanding of the current position and the steps required to achieve its objectives.
44. There are strong relationships between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (One Adoption, North and Humber). A coordinated response, including oversight through the early notification process, allows time for prospective adopters to be considered, thus reducing delay for children being placed with adoptive families. The quality of children's assessments provided is very good, and this supports the adoption panel in making recommendations about which families can meet a child's needs. The post-adoption support offer is strong, providing advice and guidance for the child and their family up until the adoptee reaches 24 years old in continued support.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

45. Young people are supported and prepared well for adulthood. Social workers ensure early planning and provide advice to children about leaving care. The right help is in place, and this reduces anxiety at a time that can be challenging for young people. Social workers, who know the children well, complete pathway needs assessments and plans, in preparation for children transferring to a personal advisor (PA), who starts to build a relationship prior to the change.
46. Care leavers benefit from stable, positive and trusting relationships with their PAs, who are committed and dedicated to improving their lives. Young people receive needs-led practical and emotional support from their PAs, who keep in touch and visit them, in line with their needs and vulnerabilities. PAs promote young people's well-being and show them that they care by being persistent in attempts to engage young people, particularly those who need additional encouragement to participate in support and trust professional advice.
47. PAs, their managers and senior leaders are ambitious and aspirational for care leavers. Care leavers' talents and successes are celebrated. Young people are encouraged to feel good about themselves and to achieve their goals. Leaders recognise care leavers' achievements and host events to celebrate them in their community.
48. PAs support young people effectively to increase their resilience and reduce isolation. PAs help young people to maintain relationships with people who are important to them and develop networks in their communities. Leaders have acted in response to young people's request for a hub, a central place to gather and spend time accessing services, and this is in development.

49. Care leavers are informed of their rights and entitlements, and they are provided with all relevant documents. Young people are supported to access healthcare services and to know their health history. PAs ensure that care leavers are routinely offered access to advocacy services to help represent their views and support them through sensitive situations, such as having access to their records after they reach 18.
50. The local offer has been enhanced and represents a strong commitment to meeting the needs of care leavers in York. The revised offer is clearer and accessible to care leavers, as leaders listened to their feedback and revised the offer accordingly. It is more personalised, enabling choice around how care leavers use it, including those living outside of the area. Young people are benefiting from its flexibility. Care leavers remain involved with the service beyond their 21st birthday, accessing support and advice when needed.
51. The majority of pathway plans are well written and co-produced with young people, reflecting need and increasing their ownership and understanding. While all PAs have a sound knowledge of the young people's needs and how they are supporting them, not all pathway plans are reviewed when young people's needs change, and therefore do not reflect the young people's circumstances and progress.
52. The vast majority of care leavers live in stable, suitable accommodation that meets their needs. Leaders have engaged effectively with housing colleagues and recently launched a joint housing protocol for care leavers. This reflects the partnership approach to meeting the needs of care leavers, which further promotes stability in their living arrangements.
53. The range of accommodation options is increasing so that young people have more choice. Preparation for independent living is promoted through use of the 'trainer flats', where young people practise independent living to inform their decisions on living alone and if it is right for them. Some young people benefit from accessing the 'staying close' offer and the provision of in-depth, tailored support packages. This wraparound support focuses on preparing young people for living independently and being 'tenancy ready', while addressing other holistic needs. The impressive offer of a lifetime tenancy on successful creation of this work is providing some young people with increased certainty in their living arrangements.
54. Some young people benefit from 'staying put' arrangements, which provide young people with continuity and ongoing support from people that they already know and with whom they have strong relationships.
55. Risks to highly vulnerable care leavers are identified well and understood. When risks escalate, including risks of exploitation, there is positive oversight and input, with the frequency of contact increasing to meet need. Appropriate action is taken to ensure a coordinated multi-agency response, which reduces risk for the vast majority.

56. Care leavers who are parents receive meaningful practical and emotional support. PAs are providing support for the parent and working alongside other agencies, including children's services, to support the whole family plan, where there is a need for assessments or plans to safely parent their children.
57. Care leavers in custody are visited often and in line with their needs and wishes. PAs work with other agencies and, for most young people, plans for their transfer or release are timely and thorough, ensuring a smooth transition into the community and a lower risk of recidivism.
58. Those care leavers who are former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high levels of personalised support that promotes their well-being. Their needs are understood, and their plans ensure that the homes and communities in which they live reflect their religious, cultural, language and community needs, and that they have a sense of belonging. Young people are making progress in their communities. PAs are proactive in planning ahead, and young people are well supported through legal processes.
59. Most care leavers are in employment, training and education. There are a range of strategies in place to further increase opportunities for care leavers to engage in employment, education and training. The 'Opportunities and Employment Broker' is beginning to develop relationships with local businesses to increase opportunities for care leavers. Residential visits and visits to universities aim to raise the aspirations of care leavers, and these are having some impact, with a number of care leavers studying at university.

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

60. The leadership of the council, the corporate executive and senior leadership team have aligned core values and a strong commitment to children, young people and families. The ambition and determination to provide outstanding services have ensured that leaders have prioritised children's needs through the significant investment of resources. The investment in the workforce and additional senior leadership capacity, along with a financial commitment, have created an environment for improvement, based around putting children first. As a result, there have been remarkable improvements to children's services. Senior leaders have successfully addressed areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and rapidly transformed them into areas of strength.
61. Political leaders and the Chief Operating Officer are well informed about the priorities and challenges within children's services and are committed to improving experiences and progress for children and young people. Executive council leaders' evidence challenge and scrutiny and are clear about accountability and where it sits. They have access to accurate and comprehensive performance information, which provides them with a line of

sight into frontline practice. They are child focused and committed to their corporate parenting responsibilities.

62. Senior leaders have been tenacious in securing funding from various available development opportunities, including from partners. Innovative and forward thinking, in line with national reforms, has led to an unwavering focus on early intervention for families and enabling children to remain in, and being supported by, their kinship networks.
63. The local authority has a determined focus on its role as corporate parent. Leaders act as corporate parents, advocating and championing children and young people. The innovative development and strengthening of the Corporate Parenting Advisor role ensures that children and young people are represented at the corporate parenting board, facilitating co-production and a collaborative approach to service design, which is now a real strength. The corporate parenting board is now co-chaired with care-experienced young people, evidencing how York values the voice of children and young people in holding leaders to account. The introduction of subgroups has enabled projects to gain traction and achieve positive change for children and young people. This has led to the greater involvement of some agencies and directorates, which is influencing decision-making. The needs of care leavers are considered at every layer of the organisation, by partners and other directorates, giving an entire council approach.
64. The senior leadership team is stable, experienced and ambitious, led by a passionate Corporate Director. Together, they have overseen continued and remarkable progress and development of children's services. They are open to challenge and are informed by learning reviews, which is driving changes and development of highly effective services. The self-evaluation provided an accurate assessment of practice and clearly identified areas for further development. The learning culture created cascades down to practitioners, led by a proactive principal social worker, and is integral to the ongoing improvements to consistency and quality of practice.
65. The implementation of a new quality assurance practice framework has brought an increased focus on the impact of practice for children. The scrutiny applied to a varied range of quality assurance activity provides significant qualitative information to assure leaders that they are targeting their focus in the right place to determine the quality of practice.
66. Leaders are proud of York's children and young people and are ambitious for them. They celebrate their talents and their successes, with leaders being recognisable and approachable to the children and young people, who describe them in positive terms.
67. Safeguarding partnership arrangements in York are embedded and mature, with a positive culture of respectful challenge and shared accountability. Links with

housing have particularly enabled a significant improvement in outcomes and opportunities for care leavers. Police and health partners have brought valuable knowledge and resources, including additional resources in attendance at ICPC and timely health assessments for children in care. There is joint funding for new developments, for example clinical psychology support and access to speech and language therapy, and these collectively strengthen the approach to safeguarding children. A comprehensive Children and Young Person Plan is owned across the partnership, which has impacted positively on the improvement of practice.

68. The use and understanding of targeted and accurate performance information by senior leaders and managers provides oversight and direct scrutiny. Challenge through the performance panel and Ambition and Assurance Board, chaired by the Chief Operating Officer, ensures remedial action or direction of resources, where required. Leaders and managers understand emerging trends and themes to better deliver services to children and their families.
69. The determined focus to secure a permanent, stable workforce is a noticeable achievement, which has had a positive impact. Senior leaders recognise the importance of their workers. Successful recruitment, strong support and effective workforce development have secured a permanent, committed workforce that provides stability for the children and families it supports.
70. Overall, the quality of supervision is strong, with reflection and direction to progress plans for children. Management oversight across most areas of children's services is also effective. This was less strong for the pathway service and children's and young people's disabilities service.
71. Workers speak positively about the strength of support, and practitioners show an in-depth knowledge of the practice model and are able to articulate the positive impact this has had on consistency and quality of practice. The embedded model offers clarity of the issues and concerns and allows for a cohesive approach to intervention.
72. Workers in York are overwhelmingly positive about their environment and the offer and benefits they have in place. They describe a positive impact because of the stable leadership team and supportive culture. There is a strong training offer and helpful opportunities to sharpen practice, resulting in a positive team morale and the sharing of resources.
73. Workers speak highly of senior leaders and managers being accessible, approachable and present. They feel valued and that their voices are heard. This has created conditions for stability and a sense of belonging for workers, who describe themselves as a community and, as such, are committed to remaining in York.



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