

Inspection of Suffolk County Council local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 June 2024

Lead inspector: Rebecca Quested, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the last inspection in 2019, when children's services were judged to be outstanding, there has been a decline in the quality of social work practice for children in need of help and protection and care leavers in Suffolk. This includes a lack of consistency in applications of thresholds in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), a lack of appropriate responses to children aged 16 and 17 years old who present as homeless and inconsistent practice for care leavers.

Social work practice for children in care has continued to provide support and stable care for most children which allows them to thrive. Since the last visit, in 2022, there have been several changes in the director of children's services (DCS) role, with a new DCS expected to start shortly. Leaders have continued to invest in children's services to ensure that children in care in Suffolk are able to live in local homes, through the development of children's homes and the fostering and adoption service.

What needs to improve?

- The consistency in the application of thresholds in the MASH.
- The quality of assessment and support to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless, including joint assessments with housing, the provision of emergency accommodation and ensuring that children are made aware of their right to be accommodated by the local authority.
- Timeliness of the application of pre-proceedings and proceedings to ensure that children do not experience delay in their permanence being secured.
- The quality and consistency of pathway planning with care leavers.
- Care leavers' understanding of their entitlements and the local care leaver offer.
- The assessment and accessibility of support for care leavers post-21.
- The comprehensiveness and accuracy of the local authority's understanding of the quality of practice for children, families and care leavers.

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

1. At the last inspection in 2019, the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection was judged to be outstanding. Although there remain strengths, there are some areas where social work practice is inconsistent, in particular in decision-making in the MASH and in responses to 16- and 17-year-old children who are homeless. As a result, the needs and risks for some children are not fully understood and appropriate services are, therefore, not put in place to support them.
2. Children and their families benefit from a range of early help services that support them to make positive changes. Assessments are thorough and services are successfully coordinated by family support workers in well-set-out plans. Well-timed decisions are made in early help when risks to children increase, and weekly transfer meetings ensure smooth step-up and step-down arrangements for children and families. These are sufficiently flexible to ensure joint working when needed so that children's needs can be responded to and met.
3. There is a timely response to contacts within Suffolk's 'front door', Customer First. In addition, there is a professional advice line which is well established and valued by partners, especially schools. Managers have oversight of the advice line activity and senior managers are assured of the appropriateness of the advice provided.
4. There is efficient communication between daytime services and the social workers in the out-of-hours emergency duty service, who respond proportionately to safeguarding concerns about children.

5. There is inconsistency in the application of thresholds in the MASH. For those children who require an immediate response to safeguarding concerns, there is effective identification of risk. Suitable decisions are made for MASH assessment and for subsequent strategy discussions which are proportionate and in line with children's risks and needs. Partnership working is a strength, and this ensures that there is a coordinated response to making sure these children are safeguarded.
6. When there are no immediate safeguarding concerns identified for children, there is an inconsistent application of thresholds during initial screening in the MASH. A small but significant number of children's cases are closed when there is limited information for safe decisions to be made. This includes where there is a history of concerns regarding domestic abuse. As a result, some children are left in situations where their needs and risks are not fully understood.
7. Parents are not always informed when anonymous referrals are made. Leaders addressed this through providing practice guidance to MASH workers during the inspection.
8. Strategy meetings are well attended by the key statutory partners and by other relevant agencies. In the majority of strategy meetings, information known to each agency is shared and the child's history reviewed, enabling a shared multi-agency consideration of the threshold for statutory intervention.
9. Child protection investigations are comprehensive. Children are visited promptly and jointly with police when necessary; their views are gathered and next steps are explained, for example, the process for video interviews. Managers provide increased oversight through the process of these investigations and decisions to proceed to initial child protection conference are proportionate.
10. There is variability in the quality of the responses from the local authority designated officer (LADO) service. Although referrals are responded to promptly, there are inconsistencies in the application of threshold and in recording outcomes. Senior leaders have identified these weaknesses. A new manager has started in post who will focus on improving the service.
11. Assessments of children's needs are mostly detailed and demonstrate social workers' ability to apply curiosity to the identified concerns. They contain information gathered from parents, children and relevant agencies. Leaders had identified that, previously, social workers were not consistently involving fathers in assessments. Recent assessments show this has improved. In stronger examples, thoughtful consideration of children's culture and the impact of adverse childhood experiences on parenting capacity helps to identify children's needs and leads to appropriate next step decision-making. Family network meetings are integral to most assessments and strengthen support to parents and children through the involvement of extended family, neighbours and friends. Social workers make good use of a neglect tool to assess and measure signs of neglect, and this adds depth to assessments and plans. Social workers'

analysis of risk and harm is supported through use of research, although it is not always nuanced to reflect the most relevant issues for the child.

12. Managers usually provide a clear rationale for the outcome of the assessment. In addition to providing accountability, this ensures that should a child read their records, they would understand how and why decisions had been made about their lives.
13. Family Solutions and the Stronger Families teams are well established and valued teams which successfully support children who are on the edge of care to remain with their families, and to return home to parental care when it is safe to do so. Workers in these services persevere, including when families are reluctant to engage, in order to bring about change, and are positively regarded by the families they work with.
14. Social workers know their children well and can articulate their individual needs. When there is a cumulative impact of harm and the risks increase, this leads to an appropriate escalation from child in need to child protection planning.
15. Children's plans are detailed and focus on the intervention needed to bring about change. Core group meetings and child-in-need review meetings are held regularly and are used effectively to review progress against the plan. Some plans do not have clear written contingency plans in place to help children and parents understand what next steps would be taken should there be little or no progress.
16. Child protection conferences are timely and well attended. Children are supported by independent advocates to attend conferences and present their views. Decisions to step down from child protection planning to child in need are discussed and agreed in advance with core group members and child protection chairs when risks for children have reduced.
17. There are a wide range of services and resources available for families as part of their children's plan, to support children's needs and address risks. However, a number of services currently have waiting times, which mean that child-in-need or child protection planning is extended while these services are put in place.
18. There is some variability in the timeliness of the use of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline and in the issuing of care proceedings. Letters before proceedings are mostly clear and outline the concerns and reasons for entering pre-proceedings, as well as what is expected of parents to avoid proceedings being issued. There is clear evidence of front-loading of work with most assessments, including parenting and connected carer assessments. These are usually completed at the earliest opportunity to reduce delay for children in securing early permanence. Some delay was related to local authority capacity in completing parenting assessments, and independent social workers are employed when necessary.

19. Some children experience delay in proceedings being issued, even though their parents are unable to care for them due to being remanded in custody or due to bail conditions. The lack of legal framework for these children is likely to contribute to a delay in achieving permanence and does not provide parents with the ability to access legal representation.
20. Social workers visit children and families at a frequency that reflects their needs. Social workers develop strong relationships and show sensitivity with the children and families they work with. Some parents said that the social worker's ability to form a relationship with them was the important factor in supporting them to make changes. Some children and parents told inspectors that they can talk to their current social worker about their feelings and that social care intervention has made a positive difference to their family's life.
21. The Make a Change (MAC) team offers tailored creative individualised support to children at risk of exploitation. Workers support them to engage in positive activities, as well as developing their and their parent or carer's understanding of the risks they face. There is creative individualised work with children and their families which has contributed to reducing risk effectively for some children. Risks from exploitation are well understood, and appropriate resources are well used and well coordinated to address these, including through multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings, weekly professionals' meetings and child protection planning when appropriate. There is effective managerial oversight of children who are missing. Prompt action is taken to locate children and strategy meetings are held in line with risks and policies. This work by the MAC team has contributed to reducing risk effectively for some children.
22. Most disabled children benefit from having skilled social workers who understand their needs well. Social workers are experienced in communicating with children who are non-verbal, to inform their assessment of needs and risks. Assessments of disabled children include the views of parents and the team around the child. Consequently, comprehensive plans are developed which support disabled children to live with their families whenever possible.
23. There are systems in place to identify children who are not in education. The local authority is working with parents, schools and multi-academy trusts to ensure clarity of expectations when children move to be home educated. This enables them to support some children back into education when it is in their best interests and provide educational and safeguarding support when necessary.
24. Most children in private fostering arrangements are appropriately assessed. Children are visited, although issues with the electronic recording system mean that assurance is not provided to leaders about the accuracy of the data to ensure that children are visited as required.
25. When children aged 16 and 17 present as homeless, there is not a clear understanding in the MASH of the local authority's duties to undertake joint

assessments with housing. Children are not made aware of their rights and entitlements, including to be accommodated by the local authority. MASH workers gather information, but this is not used effectively to inform appropriate next steps when children first present as homeless. As a result, vulnerable children's needs are not fully considered in decision-making.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

26. Children come into care at a time that is right for them. Thorough assessments and effective planning take place to secure early permanence for children when that is in their best interests. Social workers proactively seek wider family and connected people to consider kinship care when needed. Children live with their brothers and sisters when it is appropriate to do so.
27. Most children in care are living in secure and stable homes in Suffolk and are thriving. Children's diversity and identity needs are mostly considered. However, these are not always explored in the matching and care planning processes to determine how these needs can be successfully met.
28. The need to consider reunification of children with their families is well embedded in social work practice in Suffolk. Families are helped to make changes and direct work is undertaken with children to seek their views and help them understand the rationale for the proposed plans. Comprehensive assessments include the views of the independent reviewing officer (IRO) as well as those of the child, parent and any other relevant people. These assessments have appropriate senior management oversight. As a result, when children return to their parents' care, this is well planned and they have their needs met. Revocation of the care order is considered at the appropriate time.
29. Children whose needs are best met through returning to their parents and those with a plan for adoption are well supported to secure timely permanence. Effective management oversight is not yet in place to ensure that permanence is achieved promptly for other children in care. The local authority recognises this, and work is in progress to improve oversight of permanence planning. Care plans lack clarity in setting out the work needed to enable progress to be made for children to live in permanent homes.
30. Children have meaningful relationships with their social workers, who get to know them, their views and experiences through regular and frequent visits. As a result, most children develop trusting relationships with social workers who respond to their needs.
31. Social workers undertake direct work with children which is sensitive and purposeful. Social workers use this to enable children to understand why they cannot live with their families. It helps children to consider any worries they may have and informs potential longer-term arrangements. Life-story work is provided in various formats, which enables children to understand their histories and their lived experience.

32. The Children in Care Councils (C2C and Brighter Futures) are active and represent the views of children in care very well. Senior leaders engage with both groups and have implemented their ideas, with positive impact. This includes a 'care fair' and 'Watch your words', a guide focused on supporting social workers to use language more sensitively.
33. There are a small number of children living in unregistered children's homes that are not suitable for their needs. Senior managers have oversight of these vulnerable children, but this is not consistently recorded on the child's file, and it is not always clear that the IRO has had oversight of the child's care plan. This does not ensure that children would be able to understand how such important decisions had been made about where they live, should they read their records now or in the future. These children remain in unsuitable living arrangements for too long.
34. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported by social workers who take time to understand their experiences. They are supported to keep in contact with family members whenever possible. Social workers ensure that children have access to legal advice and their specific and diverse needs are considered, although this is not consistently set out in their care plans. As a result, most children are helped to have their needs met.
35. Risks are understood and appropriately responded to when children are in care. Children at risk of exploitation and who go missing from care are offered support from the MAC team. Strategy discussions and joint child protection investigations are undertaken when needed to ensure that risks are understood and managed. As a result, risks reduce for most children.
36. Children's overall health needs are addressed in a timely way. Their emotional well-being is responded to. Children can access an emotional well-being hub and specialist therapeutic services. This supports children to understand their circumstances better and to feel happier.
37. Children's educational needs are given priority and the council is aspirational for children. Children are well supported by their carers to make progress at school. Leaders in the virtual school monitor attendance and achievement well. The virtual school is proactive, ensuring children access the right education placements and supporting them effectively to ensure these are sustained.
38. Children are encouraged to engage in a wide range of activities which they enjoy. This builds their self-confidence and supports their physical and emotional health needs.
39. The vast majority of children in care live in Suffolk. When children live outside of Suffolk, the care and support they receive is meeting their assessed needs.

40. Short breaks and resources are provided to support children to remain where they are living when these are needed. This helps children to develop and maintain a secure base and limits disruption for them.
41. Suffolk is part of a regional adoption alliance (Adopt East). This enables the local authority to share resources and allows for collaborative working to create a modern adoption process. This is valued by existing families and is appealing to potential adopters. Core functions for adoption have been retained by Suffolk. Assessments of prospective adopters are timely. Preparation is thorough, through a comprehensive training package which promotes early permanence for children through fostering to adopt. This is having a positive impact on children in Suffolk.
42. Suffolk has a busy, thriving fostering service. There is a well-thought-out recruitment and retention strategy which is resulting in successful recruitment of new carers. Assessments are detailed, with vulnerabilities appropriately explored and triangulated where possible through checks and references. Foster carers receive very good support, including through three hub foster homes which support a group of foster carers as an extended family model, with a fourth planned. This promotes stability and consistency of care for children.

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

43. There is significant inconsistency in the quality of support that care leavers receive across Suffolk.
44. Children initially work with a social worker in the leaving care service before personal advisers (PAs) support their transition to adulthood. Care leavers begin to work with their PAs in a timely way. Care leavers have varied experiences of the relationships they have with their PAs and the support they receive from them. Some spoke highly of them. However, other care leavers were less positive and spoke of PAs being overworked and only being involved with them when they needed to be. Some care leavers said that PAs make empty promises.
45. The frequency of visits to care leavers varies. For some, it is not frequent enough to support the development of a strong relationship between them and their worker. For other care leavers, visits are responsive to their changing needs. This includes for those care leavers who are parents.
46. There is a strong local offer presented in an interactive e-brochure which has been co-produced with care leavers. It is only available in English currently, meaning some care leavers struggle to access it. Very few of the care leavers who inspectors met with were aware of what the local offer included, and they were not clear about their entitlements.

47. Care leavers enjoy the opportunity to participate in service development. Some care leavers are involved in influencing social work practice and some are meaningfully involved in recruitment of staff in children's social care. Those care leavers felt that their contribution is valued and that they are joint partners, with their views and opinions heard.
48. The quality of pathway assessments and the resultant plans is inconsistent. While good examples were seen, most do not reflect the individual needs, aspirations and unique circumstances of each care leaver. Care leavers' views are not always central to planning.
49. For some care leavers with specific vulnerabilities, such as those in custody, pathway plans are vague, with gaps in assessment of needs and out-of-date information. Not all pathway plans are reviewed as care leavers' circumstances change, lacking dynamic assessment of needs and risks.
50. There is a clear focus on care leavers' education, employment and training up to the age of 21. The family business apprenticeship model is in place to support some care leavers with corporate apprenticeships across the council. There is also a county-wide education, employment and training panel for care leavers who are in need of additional resources or support. Care leavers inspectors spoke to were mostly engaged in education or training, with support such as extra funding for books and laptops. Those care leavers who go to university are well supported and their academic successes are recognised and rewarded.
51. The majority of care leavers are prepared with the practical skills needed for independence, including budgeting, shopping and carrying out household tasks. They are supported when they move into their own accommodation with a welcome pack. However, some unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers said that they were not being helped to integrate into the community or to develop their independence skills.
52. When care leavers are at risk of exploitation, there is a robust multi-agency response to try and divert and support them and reduce risks.
53. While some care leavers receive effective support after they reach 21 years old, there is a general assumption within the service that most care leavers will close to the service when they reach 21. The focus for the Children in Care Council this year is to develop a 'goodbye pack' for those aged 21. After this, the onus is on the care leaver to get back in touch and ask for help, however, not all will have the confidence and ability to do this.
54. Most care leavers said they did not see PAs after they turned 21 and most said they were left to manage on their own. They spoke persuasively about their feeling that the service was only seeing their chronological age rather than their individual needs. The closure without a review of the individual care leaver's

needs means that some lack support at crucial times in their lives, such as when they are about to be released from prison.

55. While many care leavers are in suitable accommodation, there is variability in the response to meeting care leavers' accommodation needs. Some care leavers are benefiting from 'staying put' and 'staying close' arrangements, which are well developed in Suffolk. A small number of care leavers are living in unsuitable accommodation, including some with additional vulnerabilities and who are at risk. Some of these care leavers are homeless or moving in and out of temporary emergency accommodation, leaving them unable to settle in a safe and stable home.

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

56. Since the last inspection in 2019, when Suffolk was judged to be outstanding, there has been a decline in the impact of leaders on social work practice. While there continues to be political and financial support for children's services, leaders have not had sufficient grip across all parts of children's services. This has included not maintaining effective oversight of the consistency of the application of thresholds in the MASH, the response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless and how care leavers' needs are being met.
57. There have been significant changes in the council's senior leadership team. The executive director of children's services and the corporate director of children's services left about a year ago and there have been interim arrangements in place. A permanent DCS has been appointed and was due to join the council in July. This period of change has in part been ameliorated by a consistent leadership team at assistant director level and below. The lead member for children has also changed this year. The new lead member is passionate about the role and has already taken the time to learn about the various services and how these operate to meet children's needs.
58. The chief executive has provided continuity and has prioritised the needs of children and care leavers with some effect. This is reflected in her active attendance at key committees and boards. There is a commitment by the leaders of the council to develop services, with significant financial investment in children's social care. This includes an increase in the sufficiency of homes for children in Suffolk, through new council children's homes being built and the commissioning of a number of solo homes.
59. Despite the commitment of the leadership team to pursue shared ambitious objectives for children and young people in Suffolk, there are areas where this has not been achieved effectively. These objectives have included a focus on reducing the numbers of children referred to children's services and the number of children on child protection plans and coming into care. There has been some impact, with the number of referrals dropping by a quarter in the last year. Numbers of children on child protection plans and in care have also

reduced, along with a drop in the number of care proceedings issued. Positively, this means that more children are able to live safely in kinship care. However, the increasing thresholds applied in the MASH have left a small but significant number of children in situations of unassessed risk or not receiving the right care and support at the right time.

60. Leaders understand and are implementing the current social care reforms. Some of these, such as promoting kinship care, are already part of Suffolk's permanency policy and senior leaders are working with partners to implement changes with the local safeguarding partnership.
61. Senior leaders have prioritised certain areas of development at the expense of others. This has meant that they were not aware of all the weaker areas of social work practice that inspectors identified which require improvement.
62. In relation to data, there is a disconnect between senior leaders and managers in Suffolk children's services. There was inconsistency in the information shared by managers during the inspection with the information that senior leaders shared. This was seen in several areas, including in understanding the effectiveness of the pre-proceedings work (PLO) and how children's permanence is tracked.
63. Leaders have well-developed relationships with partners. As a result, there are co-funded roles in Suffolk County Council which support a holistic approach to meeting children's needs. There are excellent working relationships at all levels of the service with Cafcass and the local designated family judge. As a two-tier authority, Suffolk County Council has good working relationships with the district councils. However, there remain challenges in ensuring a consistent response to care leavers' housing needs.
64. Care leavers benefit from opportunities to be involved in influencing social work practice. Some care leavers and children in care are involved in interviewing staff, including the new DCS, and in co-production of the local offer and practice developments such as the care fair. For the children and care leavers involved, this promotes their self-confidence and helps them feel valued. The feedback inspectors received from children, care leavers and parents and carers was variable. Some talked of the positive impact social work intervention is having on their lives, whereas others, including care leavers, described feeling let down and that 'promises' have been broken.
65. A considerable number of staff have worked in Suffolk for many years. The stability of the workforce reflects the investment in staff training and qualifications. This enables staff to develop their career with Suffolk and, as a result, they have a strong sense of loyalty, which aids staff retention. As a result, most children benefit from having a consistent social worker working with them.

66. There are established quality assurance processes in place in Suffolk which flex to focus on areas that need improvement. Most audits are completed collaboratively. Social workers value the opportunity this provides to reflect on their practice. Some audits benefit from family feedback practice which provides added richness to the learning. Audits appropriately identify strengths and areas for development. However, most lack a follow-up action plan to ensure gaps are followed up and that the learning loop is completed.
67. Supervision usually takes place regularly and provides social workers with clear timebound guidance on next steps, as well as an opportunity to reflect on their practice. Social workers reported that this has improved over the last six months.
68. Workloads are mostly well managed. As a result, social workers usually have sufficient time to spend with children and families.
69. Most social workers are very skilled, confident and authoritative practitioners. They know their children well and have compassion for their traumatic experiences.



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