

East Sussex County Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 16 July 2018 to 20 July 2018

Lead inspector: Mandy Nightingale HMI

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	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

East Sussex leaders set exceptionally high standards for services that support children who need help, protection or care across this large rural local authority, while clearly communicating that this is simply what all vulnerable children are entitled to. Children's services are now judged to be outstanding overall.

Leaders and managers have successfully established a culture in which talented social workers stay, and where effective social work flourishes. The social care workforce is impressively stable and resilient at all levels and in all teams. The East Sussex model of 'connected practice' has been comprehensively rolled out and is fully embedded, resulting in helpful, enduring and trusting relationships between practitioners, children and their families, sometimes over many years. Examples of creative and purposeful direct work with children are widespread, and this work leads to substantial improvements in children's lives.

The local authority is a strong, dynamic learning organisation that encourages self-reflection at all levels. Political leaders firmly hold senior managers to account for the quality of practice and performance through highly effective strategic arrangements and direct involvement in practice audits. The well-established and regularly refreshed quality assurance framework is an important instrument in monitoring and continually improving social work practice.

Since the last inspection in 2014, when the overall effectiveness of services for children was judged to be good, the highly committed senior and political leadership team has sustained determined and detailed oversight of practice. Leaders and managers work creatively and persistently with partners to respond to emerging and changing need. An accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses underpins targeted and purposeful investment in well-regarded and nationally recognised projects and initiatives. This approach firmly supports continual improvement.

What needs to improve

- The consideration and recording of managers' rationale for the timescales they agree for completing family assessments, in line with each child's presenting needs.
- The clarity and accessibility of letters that are sent to parents when legal proceedings are being considered.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are good

1. Arrangements to respond to the needs of children who require help or protection are reliably good in all parts of the service. Children and their families enjoy helpful and enduring relationships with practitioners, who provide consistently good or better support to meet children's needs and to improve their lives.
2. Children who are referred to the Single Point of Advice (SPOA) receive a timely and proportionate response. When their needs warrant consideration by the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), senior social workers carefully RAG (red, amber and green)-rate all contacts, clearly recording decisions and next steps. Actions are progressed quickly. Thresholds are confidently and consistently applied at all levels of need. Decisions, actions and intervention are swift where children are at risk of significant harm or are 'in need'. Although all cases where children need early help are risk assessed and carefully overseen by managers, a small number of children and parents with lower-level needs experience delay in receiving one-to-one help. These families are offered alternative support, such as parenting programmes, while they wait for more targeted help.
3. Multi-agency practice is keenly focused on making sure that children are protected quickly and effectively. Across the service, strategy discussions and meetings are largely well attended by all involved professionals. These meetings facilitate the helpful consideration of relevant information to analyse risk. Detailed recordings provide a clear rationale for decisions and actions, which are then assertively pursued. As a result, children are promptly and carefully safeguarded through the clear identification of presenting risks. Inspectors highlighted some inconsistencies in the recording of a very small number of urgent strategy discussions between social workers and the police. These discussions had considered immediate actions to safeguard children, but this had not been fully recorded until after a joint visit, and sometimes a subsequent strategy meeting, had taken place.
4. Social workers recognise the factors and risks that increase children's vulnerabilities. Risks relating to domestic abuse and child exploitation are

explored well and, where appropriate, are promptly referred to either a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC), or the jointly chaired multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) panel or both. Through these forums, children's needs are carefully considered, and families are offered targeted support from specialist multi-disciplinary professionals and teams.

5. Senior managers have been proactive and responsive to concerns about the quality of work of a commissioned service in delivering return home interviews (RHIs) for children who go missing. The substantial changes in these arrangements are too recently implemented to measure the impact. However, in cases seen by inspectors, social workers had taken the right steps to understand the reasons why children go missing, visiting them to explore and record why they had left and what they did while they were away.
6. Inspectors saw detailed and thoughtful assessments and plans to address risks relating to radicalisation and female genital mutilation. Exceptional practice, supported by targeted training, was seen in work undertaken to understand the links between the childhood trauma a young person had experienced and criminal exploitation.
7. Children who are privately fostered, including those who stay at local language schools, receive comprehensive assessments and ongoing support through regular and purposeful visiting. The needs of disabled children are well considered through detailed, analytical assessments and support from an experienced specialist team. The team has the expertise and knowledge to recognise and act on safeguarding concerns, avoiding a change of social worker if such concerns arise.
8. Family assessments are consistently well written; they include family history and are well informed by research references. Assessments are analytical and evaluate risks well, including those risks that are linked to adult behaviour, and difficulties such as addiction and domestic abuse. Inspectors saw particularly meaningful engagement by social workers with non-resident parents and partners. While children are visited and are supported purposefully during the assessment phase, assessments are not always completed quickly enough and the rationale for the time taken is not evident in every case. Diversity in families is routinely considered, but this consideration sometimes lacks depth. For example, inspectors saw examples of parents' different religious backgrounds being explored well, but, in some instances, there was a lack of professional curiosity about the ethnicity of significant family members.
9. Intensive, high-quality intervention and consultation is provided through the local authority-led 'Swift' team, a multi-disciplinary service that provides specialist consultation, assessment and intervention across a wide range of need, including child exploitation, substance misuse, mental health, domestic abuse, relationship difficulties and parenting. Joint work between social

workers and this service adds depth to social work assessments and provides effective, targeted direct work to families.

10. Child protection plans are consistently clear and comprehensive. Multi-agency core groups are regular, overseeing and supporting targeted work with families well. Child in need plans are aligned to family assessments and contain specific actions for individual children, demonstrating a good understanding of children's needs and experiences. The plans are regularly reviewed and updated by well-attended multi-agency meetings, but a few child in need plans are not clear enough about when actions will be completed or when support will be provided. Support for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan and their families is purposeful, regular and well recorded, leading to improved circumstances or to decisive action to safeguard children. Practitioners supporting these families demonstrate skill, sensitivity and creativity in gathering their wishes and feelings and understanding their experiences.
11. For those children who are at most risk within their families, the public law outline (PLO) is implemented effectively, supporting confident decision-making to ensure that children and their families receive the right intervention at the right time, and that children's need for permanent and safe care is proactively considered. However, not all letters before proceedings to parents are clear enough and some are too long, making it hard for some parents to understand why professionals are so worried and what support is being offered to them. Better examples are concise and written in straightforward language, with manageable actions and realistic timescales.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are outstanding

12. The quality and longevity of social work relationships with children in care, care leavers and children who are adopted support purposeful, creative and important direct work. Outstanding practice is widespread across the service and is supported by a range of well-used direct work tools such as communication and participation, digital, and neglect toolkits. Underpinned by the well-embedded 'connected practice' model, the strength of these relationships, and the care that children and young people receive, substantially enriches and improves their lives.
13. Children enter care based on clear and timely assessments of their needs. When children come into care in an emergency, rigorous senior management oversight ensures that time-bound plans are in place to make further decisions. High-quality early preparation for court applications enables managers to make timely and evidence-based decisions for children to come into care through care proceedings, avoiding delay. The Swift service undertakes detailed, evidence-based multi-disciplinary assessments to inform decisions about children's permanent care, including the capacity of parents to

care for their children safely or whether it is appropriate for children to return home. This promotes strong decision-making and highly effective plans for children. Specialist assessments undertaken by the Swift service are routinely accepted by the court and were commended highly by the local designated family judge and Child and Family Court Advisory Support Services (Cafcass).

14. Social workers and managers in all parts of the service think about and plan for permanence early and well. Alongside robust assessments and plans, this 'whole service' approach ensures that practice to secure the best permanent option for children at the earliest opportunity is exemplary. In East Sussex, this is simply what is expected for all children. Viability and special guardianship assessments are timely and concise and clearly explain the rationale for recommendations. Large numbers of children who live in special guardianship arrangements are supported by the local authority, for example through the adoption support team. Robust processes are in place for considering long-term fostering matches, and social workers and foster carers celebrate with children when these arrangements are confirmed.
15. The well-publicised children looked after advocacy service is utilised well, but children also trust their social workers to speak up for them. Children are at the centre of care plans and they routinely take an active role in their reviews. Children have asked to communicate their views and experiences to their review meetings in a more interactive way, through videos. At the time of the inspection, the initiative was in the process of being rolled out. Challenge from Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) is evident when there is a query about the nature or pace of care plans for children. However, senior managers recognise that this needs to be more consistent.
16. Social workers and nurses for children looked after pay careful attention to children's health needs, supported by annual assessments and comprehensive health plans. Attention to children's emotional and mental health needs is particularly strong. All newly looked after children receive an initial health assessment, although for some, particularly those who live outside of East Sussex or in kinship arrangements, these assessments do not take place within 20 days. With keen challenge from the corporate parenting board and targeted work with health partners, senior managers are addressing this, for example by providing extra administration support to social workers to notify health partners when children come into care.
17. Children are supported well by specialist emotional and mental health services, such as child and adolescent mental health services for looked after children (LACCAMHS). AdCAMHS, the specialist CAMHS service for adopted children and their families, provides high-quality specialist support for 68 families, around 20 more families than it was commissioned to work with. This well-regarded service commits to promptly seeing all children and families requiring support and is considered by adopters to be a 'life line'. Psychotherapists and psychologists work alongside a local authority senior practitioner to provide high-quality therapy and consultation. The offer

includes a 12-session adolescent group, monthly specialist and placement crisis consultations, a drop-in, and a 'managing attachments' programme for adoptive parents.

18. Children in care are supported at their own pace to understand their life histories through sensitive and informative life-story and identity work. This has considerable therapeutic value. Social workers are assisted in their approach to working with children with traumatic past experiences through easily accessed, detailed consultations with specialist workers in the Swift team, LACCAMHS and AdCAMHS.
19. Children in care are supported effectively to make good progress in education. The virtual school works collaboratively with social workers and carers, providing a varied and engaging programme of courses and activities to ensure that children's educational needs are prioritised. It is positive that virtual school support, guidance and tuition extends to care leavers up to the age of 25. Staff work particularly creatively to develop education packages for children and young people who are very challenging to engage, thus improving school attendance and reducing persistent absence. Children receive additional support through the careful and creative use of the enhanced pupil premium grant. Leaders have established a successful partnership with a national charity and two local boarding schools to secure scholarships for around four children in care each year. The children who have been placed to date have thrived in these carefully matched environments.
20. Children live in very stable placements with skilled and well-supported foster carers and adopters who meet their needs exceptionally well. The fostering recruitment strategy has been a success, with only a small loss of foster carers due to retirement. Assessment, training and support for foster carers are significant strengths, and foster carers value highly the help they receive to care for children through challenging times. Building on established practice, the local authority continues to sensitively use 'fostering to adopt' placements. Ten children were living in such placements at the time of the inspection, and a specific support group is provided for these carers.
21. A large proportion of children in care are placed near to their friends and family, and with East Sussex foster carers who live in the local authority area. This is much higher than similar local authorities. When children live outside East Sussex, they continue to receive effective and personally tailored support to meet their ongoing needs. Children's contact arrangements with family and friends are well considered and planned, enabling children in care to spend positive time with family and friends.
22. An impressive whole-council approach to the support of care leavers means that this has markedly improved since the previous inspection in 2014. For instance, pathway plans start in good time, they are comprehensive, and they are completed in partnership with young people. Plans are regularly reviewed jointly with young people and with clear management oversight, and most are

used as a meaningful and dynamic document. Young people transfer from their social worker to a personal adviser in the support through care team when they are ready for this transition and not before. Personal advisers demonstrate genuine care for young people and the challenges they face, while being realistic about what is achievable. Care leavers receive support that is well balanced between nurture and encouragement to live more independently when they are ready. Personal advisers maintain determined and regular contact with young people through texts and other social media, as well as visits and phone calls.

23. 'Staying put' is actively promoted as an option for care leavers, and a small proportion over the age of 18 continue to live with their foster carers. Care leavers are assertively helped to find the right accommodation for them, although options are sometimes limited. Since the last inspection, the proportion of care leavers living in suitable accommodation has remained stable, just below that of similar local authorities. The local authority has taken steps to improve this performance, and, according to their own data, it is steadily improving. Data extracted directly from the client database is unreliable, and managers have had to use alternative methods to assure themselves that their performance information is accurate.
24. Assertive and persistent joint work between senior managers and district councils is improving the supply, availability and consistency of suitable accommodation across all district and borough councils. These negotiations are complex, and there has been some delay in successfully tackling this issue since the previous inspection in 2014. The local authority has invested in a 'crash-pad' for care leavers. This is an effective stopgap, meeting young people's emergency needs and providing a bridge to accessing suitable accommodation.
25. Care leavers receive good financial support to enable them to get the best from the opportunities available to them. A recently produced 'local offer' document, developed with the children in care council, is a reference point for all these entitlements. Although young people and those supporting them know what they are entitled to, this document has not yet been publicised well enough. Personal advisers work proactively with health services, the virtual school, housing providers and adult social care to access the support that young people need. Care leavers are creatively supported to access further and higher education through a range of financial support. A good proportion of care leavers go on to higher education, including university. Inspectors saw numerous examples of personal advisers enthusiastically and imaginatively encouraging care leavers to persist with their objectives and plans, particularly when young people's motivation had waned.

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

26. An experienced and confident political and senior leadership team, with long service in East Sussex, demonstrates an impressive level of understanding about their community and the impact of services for local children. Leaders know their services extremely well and, in their self-evaluation, had already identified and considered all the strengths and areas for development highlighted through this inspection. Senior leaders are visible, spending time with frontline practitioners through scheduled events and visits to teams. This has a consistently positive impact across a service that is spread over a large rural local authority, with varying degrees of deprivation and need.
27. Accurate insight, combined with determined influence, has enabled leaders and managers to establish a consistently good service for children who need help or protection and to provide outstanding support to children in care.
28. The positive impact of East Sussex's approach to developing, inspiring and retaining the children's social care workforce was seen throughout frontline practice in this inspection. Inspectors saw examples of children having the same social worker for many years. The local authority has been nationally recognised through the silver award for employer of the year in the 2017 national social work awards. The commitment and aspiration of leaders to establishing an outstanding service are demonstrated through achieving two national awards for its THRIVE programme. This programme involved a reform of safeguarding systems and considerable investment in the training of staff to be more skilled and confident in building relationships with families. Leaders have also established an effective teaching partnership, working closely with two local universities that provide valuable expertise to social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment, and ongoing professional support and teaching to experienced practitioners.
29. Workforce sufficiency planning is exemplary, and children benefit from the support they receive from increasingly experienced, stable and resilient practitioners. Through creating an environment which is attractive to social workers and which benefits children, East Sussex has established a longstanding record of not needing to employ any agency social workers. Leaders recognise the demands on social workers with increasingly complex caseloads and have very recently recruited a small number of agency staff to bridge a gap until new permanent social workers commence employment. This ensures that workloads remain stable and that permanent social workers continue to benefit from the progressive and supportive practice environment.
30. Social workers have easy access to a range of relevant training, targeted tools and specialist consultation; this supports them to meet the complex needs of children. They told inspectors that although their work is challenging, it is also fulfilling. They enjoy working in East Sussex and most plan to stay, and this is partly due to the climate of opportunity that has been established by senior

managers. Social workers who wish to are proactively supported to develop their skills as 'practice educators', to build their knowledge and practice experience in different parts of the service and to progress to more senior positions within the organisation.

31. Senior managers know the needs of children and have been tenacious in their challenge, for example, to secure more funding to address the gap in meeting the housing needs of care leavers. Leaders understand their demographic extremely well, adapting and developing services to ensure that they continue to be effective. For example, the leadership team recognised shortfalls in the quality of return home interviews for children who go missing from home or care, making significant changes to these arrangements as a result.
32. Innovative interventions are rigorously tested to assess whether they lead to sustained service improvements. At the time of the last inspection in 2014, the Swift service was a newly established service. It has subsequently developed into a valuable multi-disciplinary team with mature strategic partnerships. The service provides holistic, cross-disciplinary systemic assessments, interventions and consultations, including specialist court assessments. It is firmly rooted in a strong, continuously developing evidence and research base, working in close partnership with Sussex University. The Local Family Justice Board and the family court judge reported very positively about the quality of the service.
33. A range of other highly regarded specialist services contribute to exceptional practice and improved outcomes for children; inspectors found that these services had been implemented carefully and are expertly overseen through effective partnership arrangements. These include: Foundations, a long-established project working with parents whose previous children have been removed from their care through care proceedings; AdCAMHS, a partnership to secure boarding school scholarships for children in care; an enhanced family drug and alcohol court (FDAC); a newly established specialist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) team; a dynamic partnership with Sussex University; I-Rock drop-in sessions for young people, addressing their individual needs and vulnerabilities; and 'e-motion', an online counselling service for children.
34. Senior and political leaders are enthusiastic and meticulous corporate parents. Members of the children in care council are enthusiastic about making changes that will benefit all children in care. They are helped by senior and political leaders who listen to them. Assertiveness and creativity in recruiting new foster carers are proving to be fruitful and enable the large majority of children who live in foster care to remain within the local area and close to their families. Foster carers and adopters are well trained and sensitively supported by a range of highly regarded services, helping them to meet children's often complex needs.

35. Probing oversight and challenge from the corporate parenting board, scrutiny committee and the East Sussex safeguarding children's board are routine, all closely holding senior managers to account. A well-crafted quality assurance framework demonstrates how learning from audits, serious case reviews and service user feedback contributes to practice improvement. Deep-dive case audits and dip-sample audits, for instance of re-referrals at the front door and of visits to children in need, are thoughtfully planned in accordance with emerging intelligence and performance trends. Learning is taken forward and reviewed through practice workshops and monthly performance reports. Managers at all levels are involved, for example the chief executive regularly shadows case audits, increasing her oversight and understanding of the quality of practice.
36. A recent change in the electronic recording system that is used by children's social care has resulted in a decline in the accuracy of some performance reports, such as those relating to suitable accommodation. Leaders have swiftly responded, devising appropriate and effective performance management tools to ensure continued high-quality performance monitoring. Inspectors saw this having a positive impact, for example on the oversight and efficient management of contacts at the front door.
37. The majority of social workers benefit from regular supervision. Without exception, social workers said that they value highly the quality of support that they receive from managers and colleagues. The influence and decisions of managers are consistently evident. As a result, avoidable delay in progressing plans for children is rare.
38. Managers regularly monitor social worker caseloads, ensuring that they are manageable and that practitioners have enough time to develop trusting and helpful relationships with children. Prompt action is taken to address variances or to maintain social workers' workloads at a level that takes account of the need for them to visit children who live outside of East Sussex. The caseloads of a very small number of social workers in the family support teams are higher than the local authority's recommended level. Senior managers demonstrated detailed knowledge about these caseloads and were already taking steps to reduce them.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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