

**Report to:** Corporate Parenting Panel

**Date of meeting:** 24 April 2024

**By:** Director of Children’s Services

**Title:** Inspection of East Sussex Local Authority Children’s Services

**Purpose:** This report sets out the outcome of the Council’s Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services in December 2023

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the findings of the inspection and the draft action plan.

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**1 Background**

1.1 East Sussex County Council was inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) under the framework and evaluation schedule for Inspections of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) from 11 – 15 December 2023.

**2 Supporting information**

2.1 The outcome of the inspection was published 6 February and is attached at Appendix 1. The Council’s Children’s Services has been judged to be good overall and outstanding for the experiences and progress of children in care. This is a good outcome for the service and for the Council which has made keeping vulnerable people safe, a priority outcome. It is a very welcome recognition of all the hard, determined, and high-quality work the service has done since the last inspection, through a time of pandemic, its continuing effects, and cost of living pressures. The judgement for each area of the inspection is set out below.

| <b>Judgement</b>  | <b>Grade 2018 inspection</b> | <b>Grade 2023 inspection</b> |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families  | Outstanding                  | Good                         |
| The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection     | Good                         | Good                         |
| The experiences and progress of children in care (and care leavers 2018)  | Outstanding                  | Outstanding                  |
| The experiences and progress of care leavers (introduced in January 2023) | N/A                          | Good                         |
| Overall effectiveness   | Outstanding                  | Good                         |

2.2 The inspectors spend most of their time with frontline staff and the inspection outcome is a reflection of the difference staff make to the lives of children and young people in East Sussex.

2.3 The report notes:

‘Children in East Sussex continue to receive consistently strong and effective support that helps them to improve their lives. Since the last ILACS inspection in 2018, the authority has responded well to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing numbers of

families experiencing financial hardship and the growing number children with complex needs who require help.’

#### 2.4 The report picks up the leadership of the Corporate Parenting Panel:

‘Support for vulnerable children is a priority for leaders and cross-party leadership of the Corporate Parenting Board demonstrates the collective will to do the right things for children and their families.’

#### 2.5 Key strengths highlighted in the report include:

- Most children and families move quickly into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) when necessary. For the majority of children, proportionate decision making reflects children’s needs and is responsive to the level of risks that they face.
- Social workers are confident and experienced at identifying the range of risk factors impacting on children.
- Children’s identity and heritage are considered well in terms of planning for the right support, including their gender, sexuality and faith.
- Strategy meetings are well attended and are held in line with the level of perceived risk to children.
- Child-in-need and child protection plans focus on what matters most to children. They are reviewed in a timely way at multi-agency review meetings that are well attended.
- Disabled children with complex needs, supported by practitioners from the disabled children’s service, receive strong support. Well-managed caseloads allow workers to respond to children’s needs and to work with multi-agency partners effectively.
- The multidisciplinary specialist family service (SWIFT) works alongside social care services to provide highly valued expertise in assessment and intervention across a wide range of need, including parental substance misuse, domestic abuse, mental health, and assessment work for families before or during court proceedings.
- Well-established systems, underpinned by strong relationships with partner agencies, enable an effective response to out-of-hours concerns.
- The oversight of elective home education is an area of strength. There is an effective system for the tracking of high numbers of pupils who are educated at home and staff seek to identify and support children who may be at increased risk of harm.
- Children in care, including disabled children, are well cared for and live in homes that meet their needs. Social workers consider children’s diversity needs very carefully so that they can support them to settle well with their careers and make progress in their education.
- Social workers know the children (*in care*) they support exceptionally well. They are insightful and attuned to children’s needs, helping them to express their views using individualised and bespoke communication methods.
- The health needs of children in care are considered well. Health assessments, dental and optician checks are arranged for children, and strengths and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) are completed as part of the health assessments.
- Governance of the virtual school is effective, and the virtual school makes a positive difference to children’s academic and personal development.
- (Care leavers) benefit from enduring and trusted relationships with workers who support them well. The support provided to care leavers makes a positive difference as they move into adulthood.
- Care leavers are supported to maintain links with family members and other adults to ensure that they have access to a network of people who can offer them long-lasting support into adulthood.

- The local offer, co-created with care leavers, contains helpful information about the wide range of financial and practical support, specialist advice and services that are available to them. A small number of aspects of the offer are not sufficiently explicit, including access to the dedicated mental health practitioner and prescriptions.
- Leaders are taking appropriate action to expand the range of opportunities for care leavers, for example through access to council-led mentoring schemes, apprenticeships or work experience, or links to local businesses and the culture sector.
- Investment in early help services, and current work to establish a new multidisciplinary model for locality teams, as well as plans to enable the specialist SWIFT services to deliver support at an earlier point, demonstrate the corporate commitment to delivering sustainable and impactful support for children.
- The long-standing stability of the workforce enables well-rooted relationships to develop with children and care leavers in East Sussex. Leaders make no secret of the fact that the workforce is their most valuable asset.
- Workers stay in East Sussex because they feel valued and supported to do well.
- Inspectors had the pleasure of meeting a group of articulate, caring and kind young people, all of whom said that they felt safe and had someone to turn to as a trusted adult.

2.6 Ofsted provided a child friendly summary to inform children and young people about the inspection outcomes. This is attached at Appendix 2.

2.7 The report identifies three areas for improvement:

- The quality of plans for children and care leavers so that they are all specific, measurable and timebound.
- The recording of management oversight, supervision and direction.
- The oversight, timeliness and rigour of the response to children:
  - experiencing neglect, including children in Public Law Outline pre-proceedings, and
  - in private fostering arrangement

2.8 The draft post-inspection action plan in response to the report is attached at Appendix 3. The final action plan will be shared with Ofsted by 17 May 2024.

### **3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

3.1 East Sussex has maintained a focus on the key priority outcome of keeping vulnerable people safe and responded well to the impact of the pandemic, increased demand and the challenging financial context for both families and the Council. The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to note the contents of the inspection report and the draft action plan.

**ALISON JEFFERY**

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#### MEMBERS

All

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None