

Inspection of East Sussex local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 December 2023

Lead inspector: Tom Anthony, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children in East Sussex continue to receive consistently strong and effective support that helps to improve their lives. Since the last ILACS inspection in 2018, the authority has responded well to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing numbers of families experiencing financial hardship and the growing numbers of children with complex needs who require help. Support for vulnerable children is a priority for leaders, including the chief executive, lead member and director of children's services. Cross-party leadership of the corporate parenting board demonstrates the collective will to do the right things for children and their families.

In most areas, the quality and impact of practice have remained strong, and the stability of the workforce is impressive. However, records of management oversight and challenge, as well as the quality of practice in discrete areas, including the two areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection, are not consistently robust.

What needs to improve?

- 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 arrangements.

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

1. Staff at the single point of advice (SPoA) provide a timely response to initial contacts in East Sussex. Essential information is gathered to help inform appropriate threshold decisions at this stage. This helps workers to identify the right service in line with children's needs. Consent is understood, sought and dispensed with appropriately. Parents' views are taken into account in decision-making.
2. Although an increase in demand has led to delays in allocation for a small number of families, the majority of families receive effective early help at the right time for them. Once allocated to an early help key worker, children and their families benefit from a high level of support. This enables children and families to build relationships rapidly with workers who understand their needs and work effectively with them to reduce risk and make enduring change.
3. 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. For most children, social workers' analysis and recommendations are thorough and based on timely and comprehensive information-gathering.
4. Social workers are confident and experienced at identifying the range of risk factors impacting on children. They plan intervention to reduce risk and progress safety plans. They work closely with parents, sharing reports and safety plans so that children are safer.
5. Management oversight is captured well within MASH information-gathering records, and the rationale for decision-making is mainly clear in terms of next steps or prioritisation leading up to and following strategy discussions. Re-referral rates are low. Managers in the MASH provide clear advice on next steps for children moving into statutory assessment. However, indicative timescales for completing the assessment in accordance with the child's needs are not defined at the outset. Some assessments are taking many weeks, with the

rationale not being clear. This was an area for improvement at the last inspection.

6. Most assessments are analytical and thorough, and they are often informed by research and practice learning reviews. They take into account parents' own experiences, concerns and vulnerabilities. Direct work is undertaken with children during the assessment process. This captures their experiences well, and they are helped to share sensitive and difficult feelings. However, evidence of this work is not always uploaded onto children's records.
7. Children's identity and heritage are considered well in terms of planning for the right support, including their gender, sexuality and faith.
8. Decision-making is robust and leads appropriately to escalation when needed to safeguard children. Strategy meetings are well attended and are held in line with the level of perceived risk to children. During child protection enquiries, experienced social workers visit children quickly at a time and place where the child feels comfortable.
9. Domestic abuse specialist workers support practitioners and families, helping to create immediate safety plans for children who have been exposed to domestic abuse. Culturally matched community groups are identified to provide ongoing and sensitive support to victims.
10. 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. While practice itself is strong, plans are not consistently sharply focused on what tangible change is needed and by when, and many do not contain well-articulated contingency plans.
11. Children who have a child-in-need or child protection plan receive regular visits from practitioners who build relationships with them and their families to support change and improvements. Practitioners are skilled and knowledgeable, using a wide range of direct work tools in their one-to-one meetings with children.
12. 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. Creative use is made of visual tools to capture children's views and wishes and these feed into children's plans. Plans are dynamic and they are flexed as children and families make progress and their circumstances change.
13. 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. A waiting list to access some services creates short-term delays

for some children. Senior leaders are aware of this and plans are in place to frontload the use of SWIFT in the Public Law Outline (PLO) process.

14. Some children experience neglect for too long. Episodes of marginal improvement are followed by a return to significant and impactful neglect, and there is insufficient evidence of reflection on what has and has not worked in the past. A new neglect toolkit has recently been launched and is yet to have an impact.
15. Oversight and challenge to drive progress during PLO pre-proceedings are not sufficiently effective. Some children are subject to pre-proceedings for too long. Letters to parents, as was the case at the last inspection, are not written in a way that makes clear the concerns regarding children's experiences and what needs to change.
16. The dangers of harm by exploitation are understood well, and risks are reduced through effective support provided to children at risk of extra-familial harm. Mapping identifies links between children and the adults who are exploiting them. Police plan disruptive actions, including specialist operations, and 'connected coaches' offer a multidisciplinary approach, providing intensive and effective support to children aged 11 to 17 and their families.
17. Staff in East Sussex are creative and effective in the way in which they engage children and families to continually improve the impact of their work. A well-established collaboration against child exploitation (CACE) group for parents of children who are exploited supports parents well and is a vital resource for them. Parent mentors also provide key support to families who are going through family drug and alcohol court (FDAC) proceedings.
18. Well-established systems, underpinned by strong relationships with partner agencies, enable an effective response to out-of-hours concerns.
19. Concerns about adults working with children are dealt with thoroughly by a well-managed local authority designated officer service that has good systems in place for the management of allegations, concerns and complaints.
20. Once notified about children living in private fostering arrangements, not all children are visited swiftly in their homes as part of the assessment of their safety. This means that potential risks are not rigorously assessed.
21. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive an appropriate and effective response. They are provided with advice and information to help them to make appropriate decisions about the support that they need.
22. 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. The local authority has clear procedures to identify and monitor

children who are missing education. They work positively with families and schools to determine and address the main barriers to accessing education.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

23. Most children come into care in East Sussex at the right time and after other family options have been explored. Providing children in care with consistent support and minimising changes of social worker are priorities from the outset. The strong relationships that children have with their workers have a positive impact on the progress that they make.
24. 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 carers and make progress in their education. Children have many opportunities to learn and to have fun, including through dancing, horse riding and cookery. Workers advocate effectively for resources, including holidays and activities.
25. Social workers know the children 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. They visit children regularly and keep in frequent contact, including in the evenings and at weekends, so that children have positive, long-term relationships with a trusted adult. The frequency of visits and contacts is increased when children need additional support.
26. Continuity of allocated social worker is prioritised and these long-standing relationships have a positive impact on children's progress and experiences. Social workers are able to understand children's experiences, the impact of trauma and significant life events. Provision is in place for therapy and bespoke emotional support when it cannot be accessed from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), and this supports children's evolving identity and independence.
27. Children's plans set out how their needs will be met, including for their health and education, and they identify what they need to thrive and to maintain important relationships. Care plans are updated in line with statutory timescales, but not routinely as situations change. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are involved in placement decisions, assessments and care planning. Review records do not always provide the clarity to understand the journey of the children, but they are written sensitively to children who are encouraged to chair their own 'My Voice Matters' reviews. IROs escalate concerns promptly and appropriately.
28. Arrangements for early discussion of care and permanence plans for children, including, for example, with fostering and adoption colleagues, are unclear. There is no overall tracking to ensure that permanence plans and contingencies are in place, although this is not causing identifiable delay. Leaders are taking

appropriate action to establish a consistent method to record and track children's permanence plans.

29. 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. The findings are used to identify and plan for children's health and therapeutic care needs.
30. The importance of children maintaining connections with family and friends is fully recognised and prominent in the plans made for them. Consideration is given to brother and sister relationships and careful planning helps the children to live together whenever possible. Parents and wider family are enabled to spend positive time with their children.
31. Reunification is explored when this is realistic and in children's best interests. Placement with parents assessments are thorough; they analyse risk and represent the child's voice and health needs. They are appropriately reviewed and authorised by a senior manager.
32. A very small number of children with highly complex needs live in unregistered children's homes. The arrangements are closely monitored and the search to identify registered and suitable provision to meet children's needs is an ongoing process.
33. Supervising social workers provide regular supervision to foster carers, although this varies in quality. Training for foster carers has been enhanced, including a renewed focus on understanding diversity. Detailed and timely reports are provided for panel, which is overseen by a strong and knowledgeable panel chair. Decision-making and recommendations are timely and in line with the aim to promote the welfare of children in foster care.
34. Adoption for children, achieved through membership of the regional adoption agency (Adoption South East), is a strength. Governance arrangements are clear and effective. Early permanence for children is provided by fostering to adopt carers who are informed and well supported. The model of conducting virtual panels delivers a flexible and cost-efficient service that minimises delay for children's future planning.
35. Governance of the virtual school is effective, and the virtual school makes a positive difference to children's academic and personal development. Staff at the school provide helpful guides for designated teachers about personal education plans, as well as training and additional funding to support children accessing extra-curricular clubs. Schools are overwhelmingly positive about the support provided by the virtual school.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

36. Most care leavers are helped to make good progress in their lives. They benefit from enduring and trusted relationships with workers who support them well. Social workers and personal advisers keep in frequent contact with care leavers. These relationships continue in accordance with care leavers' needs, regardless of age. Personal advisers are committed and persistent in helping to improve care leavers' lives and experiences, and they encourage them to make changes, even when this is challenging and support is not welcomed. The support provided to care leavers makes a positive difference as they move into adulthood.
37. Care leavers are introduced to social workers and personal advisers at a time that is right for them and following their 14th birthday. Children are allocated a personal adviser by the time they are 17 and a half years old, and, when needed, social workers continue to support care leavers past their 18th birthday. This fluid approach provides an opportunity for joint working and the development of new relationships and reduces the impact of changes of worker and feelings of loss that could leave care leavers feeling unsupported.
38. The majority of pathway plans are created with care leavers but they are not consistently specific and timebound so that impact and progress can be tracked and measured. Stronger plans identify needs well and lead to relevant actions to help care leavers. Independence skills are mostly well considered via the passport to independence work as care leavers move towards adulthood. However, for a small number of care leavers, their voices are not sufficiently captured. Some pathway plans are not sufficiently ambitious or aspirational. Plans do not always reflect the depth of the support that is actually being provided and how this is helping care leavers to make positive progress and changes in their lives.
39. 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.
40. Care leavers have good access to a range of health services that support their general physical health and emotional well-being. These include a dedicated mental health practitioner who works directly with them. Workers offer both practical and emotional support. However, not all pathway plans capture opportunities and activities that will help care leavers to stay healthy.
41. Many care leavers are helped to stay in education, employment and training and to achieve their career and further education goals. When things are difficult or they need help with future options, care leavers are appropriately signposted to youth employability services and weekly drop-in sessions that provide practical help, advice and guidance. Care leavers who are not in employment, training or education are supported to return at a time that is

right for them. 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.

42. 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. Care leavers living in East Sussex receive council tax exemptions, but those living elsewhere do not.
43. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly and receive encouragement to access opportunities that will positively support them on their return to their community. Personal advisers work well with families and other professionals to plan in advance for their return.
44. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are well supported by a specialist team of practitioners who are experienced and skilled in understanding the impact of earlier life experiences and trauma and supporting them with their asylum applications.
45. Care leavers who are young parents receive good levels of support, practical help and guidance on becoming a new parent. There is also appropriate support for care leavers who live separately from their child.
46. The needs and vulnerabilities of care leavers aged over 21 are identified and addressed within visits and other contact, but the records of these activities are not sufficiently clear. Their progress and development are not captured well at regular intervals. This makes it difficult for care leavers to look back and see their progress when reading their records.
47. Most care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs and where they feel safe. This includes staying with former carers, returning to family, or living in supported accommodation or in private or council-rented homes. A small number of care leavers live in unsuitable accommodation; they are being provided with support to help them move into something more suitable.
48. Good use is made of the annual children in care and care leavers survey to understand the experiences of care leavers and identify areas for development, especially around emotional well-being and loneliness. Managers acknowledge the need to improve engagement and to strengthen direct opportunities for the voices and experiences of care leavers to influence service development.

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

49. Services that support vulnerable children are a shared and unifying priority in East Sussex. The chief executive, lead member and director of children's services are well informed by the frequent and varied occasions when they meet with children and care leavers to hear them talk about their experiences. This feedback helps to shape services and plans. Leaders are exploring how they can better enable children to contribute routinely to corporate parenting board meetings.
50. 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.
51. Regular reporting to the chief executive when children are placed in unregistered children's homes, and the monthly review of the children who are assessed as being at the highest risk or highly vulnerable, mean that the challenges that children and families experience are understood at a senior level.
52. Leaders are realistic in their self-evaluation and are clear about the areas where improvements are needed. For example, they are aware that children's and care leavers' plans are not consistently SMART and they are taking appropriate action to improve quality.
53. Positive reports from the judiciary and the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), along with feedback from designated safeguarding leads in schools, confirm senior managers' commitment to delivering effective partnership working. The highly valued and effective FDAC service is an example of their determination to work collaboratively to provide the right support to children and families.
54. Leaders have created a range of effective specialist services, including connected coaches, who provide intensive support to children on the edge of care or who are returning to live with their families, in response to the escalating volume and complexity of children's needs.
55. A wide range of performance information is reported and analysed to help to identify trends in demand and assess the impact of the support provided. However, in a small number of areas, incomplete data inhibits an up-to-date understanding of the needs of children and care leavers. Leaders know this and have plans to improve the data available to them.

56. For some of the most vulnerable children, including those subject to PLO pre-proceedings, there is insufficiently rigorous tracking and oversight of progress to ensure that plans are implemented at the right pace for children.
57. An extensive quality assurance framework helps leaders to maintain clear oversight of activity. Audits provide leaders with a line of sight to frontline practice and are well received by the workforce as an opportunity to pause and reflect on their practice.
58. The quality and impact of supervision are very variable and mean that practitioners, and thereby children, do not always benefit from effective management direction and challenge. Records of supervision are not consistently detailed.
59. 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. Staff retention rates are impressive, and time after time inspectors saw children and care leavers who have developed trust and confidence in workers, many of whom have supported them for long periods of time.
60. Workers stay in East Sussex because they feel valued and supported to do well. They hold manageable caseloads and are able to visit children regularly to build effective relationships. They speak highly of the support that they receive from practice managers and they value the range and frequency of learning and development opportunities. These opportunities help workers to develop their professional skills, as well as those who want to progress their careers into more senior roles.
61. 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.

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