

Inspection of safeguarding Essex

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Reporting inspector: Richard Nash

Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. A full inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in Essex took place in June 2010 and found that the overall effectiveness of safeguarding services in Essex was inadequate. The overall effectiveness of services for looked after children was adequate. An unannounced inspection of Essex's contact, referral and assessment arrangements in March 2011 found three areas for development and no priority actions.
2. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services in the local area towards ensuring that children and young people are properly safeguarded. The inspection team consisted of three of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The inspection was carried out under the Children Act 2004.
3. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - information gathered through discussions with: children and young people receiving services; front line managers; senior officers including the Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board; elected members; and a range of community representatives
 - the analysis and evaluation of reports from a variety of sources including: a review of the Children and Young People's Plan; performance data; information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision; and the evaluations of a serious case review undertaken by Ofsted in accordance with *'Working Together to Safeguard Children'*, 2010
 - a review of 61 case files for children and young people with a range of need. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken
 - the outcomes of the most recent annual unannounced inspection of local authority contact, referral and assessment services undertaken in March 2011
 - interviews and focus groups with front line professionals, managers and senior staff: from Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust; the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust; Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust; South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust; North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust; Essex Primary Care Trusts; the Police; and other relevant partners.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

4. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

5. Essex County Council has 298,460 children and young people below the age of 18. This is 21.1% of the total population in the county (1.41m). The proportion entitled to free school meals is 11.3%, which is below the national average of 16.6%. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 12.8% of pupils in primary schools and 11.0% of pupils in secondary schools. This is below the national average of 26.8% and 23.0% respectively, and includes 0.2% children and young people from Traveller communities.
6. At the time of this inspection there are 1,575 looked after children. This number comprises of 345 children under five years of age, 1,032 children of school age (5–16) and 198 post-16. There were 829 children subject to Child Protection Plans as at 16th September 2011.
7. Five local Children's Commissioning and Delivery Boards operate at a local level as part of the wider County Children's Partnership, which is accountable for driving forward and delivering the children's agenda. Membership of the Children's Partnership includes representatives of Primary Care Trusts, Essex Police, the 12 district councils, community and voluntary organisations and schools.
8. The Essex Local Safeguarding Children Board (ESCB) is chaired by an independent chair and brings together the main organisations working with children, young people and families in Essex to deliver safeguarding services.
9. The Children's Social Care Service has 635 fostering households. Children's residential care is provided by 10 local authority children's homes, including one secure unit. Additional services are commissioned from registered and approved independent providers.

10. Access to children's social care services is provided by a countywide initial response team (IRT) and a countywide out of hours service. The county is divided into four quadrants, each comprising of locally-based social work teams.
11. In total there are 13 intervention and assessment teams; 14 family support and protection teams; five children with disabilities teams; seven family centres (including a Family Group Conference service); 14 children in care teams; and four leaving and aftercare teams. Essex uses a virtual school approach in its support of the learning of looked after children.
12. There are also five locality fostering teams, a countywide fostering recruitment team and a kinship assessment team. Private fostering services are provided through a designated team situated within the local authority countywide fostering service. The adoption service is provided through three adoption locality teams, a specialist post-adoption team and a specialist team for seeking adoptive placements for older children.
13. Other family support services are delivered through 86 designated children's centres and extended services in schools. Some services are provided or coordinated through multi-agency allocation groups, such as the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) Tier 2 services and parenting support.
14. Commissioning and planning of health services are carried out under the auspices of five Primary Care Trusts Boards in the west, mid, north, south west and south east areas of the county, which are grouped into two locality clusters for both the north and south. Acute hospital services are provided by Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust, the Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust and Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust. Learning disability services are provided by Essex County Council, South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and Essex Primary Care Trusts. Adult mental health services are provided by South Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, and CAMHS are provided by North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and Essex County Council.

Safeguarding services

Overall effectiveness

Grade 3 (adequate)

15. The overall effectiveness of services in Essex to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded is adequate. Significant improvements to services have clearly taken place since the last inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in June 2010. These include having effective arrangements in place to manage, assess and analyse allegations against members of the children's workforce, the implementation of performance management and quality assurance systems and improvements in safeguarding services by health partners. In addition, the council has taken effective action to make improvements to staffing resources by increasing the number of permanent staff across children's services, by managing poor performance effectively and creating new posts to support the restructure of the whole service. The improvements made in relation to service delivery and safeguarding are clearly on-going and given the size of Essex will take time to fully develop. However, senior managers have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have demonstrated their ability to take decisive action by addressing staffing pressures when they occur.
16. The council have developed a very comprehensive management information and quality assurance framework that has enabled senior officers to gauge progress and embed a culture of accountability amongst the workforce. This is planned to be further strengthened by the development of multi-agency audits of casework. The impact of all the improvements to services has yet to be fully realised and although children and young people at immediate risk of significant harm are now identified in a timely manner, the quality of casework and assessments remains variable. Although no children were found by inspectors to be at immediate risk of harm in the cases examined by inspectors, the practice adopted in some, where there was a delay in seeing the child following a referral, exposed children and young people to the potential risk of harm. Senior managers have taken immediate steps to address the practice issues identified by inspectors in relation to Section 47 enquiries.
17. Although this inspection has identified a number of areas of practice that still need to be improved, no children or young people were found to be at risk of significant harm. The council has made good progress since the last inspection and there are clear indicators that the strategic plans currently in place will support further improvement and address those areas of practice that need further attention.

Capacity for improvement

Grade 3 (adequate)

18. The capacity for improvement in Essex is adequate. Elected members, senior officers, partners and front line staff all share the same vision for prioritising safeguarding services and service improvement. Careful budget monitoring and the protection of budgets for front line services give strong indications of sustainability in terms of resources and the council's commitment to improve is underlined by service restructure developments which are just taking shape. This has included the creation of new posts, the regrading of others and performance management actions to ensure that the right staff with the right skills are in the right posts.
19. The newly appointed independent chair of the ESCB has undertaken a thorough review of the work of the board and has set out plans to refocus activity in some areas to ensure that the work of the board and its sub-groups closely supports service improvement and can take over and manage the work of the Improvement Board once it ceases to function. Work with health partners is beginning to address some of the resource and interagency working challenges previously identified and plans are in place to improve key partnerships, including those with the Police.

Areas for improvement

20. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for safeguarding children and young people in Essex, the local authority and its partners should take the following action:

Immediately:

- ensure that children and young people are seen in a timely way commensurate with referral or other presenting information
- resolve, with Essex Police, the backlog of domestic abuse notifications and devise appropriate methods to prevent further backlogs being created
- ensure that Section 47 enquiries fully comply with local procedures and in accordance with the guidance given in '*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, 2010
- ensure that all gaps in the employment history of job applicants are appropriately explored and recorded on human resources files.

Within three months:

- redesign current audit forms in order for key casework milestones and qualitative information to be easily and clearly identified during audits

- review the skills and experience of those who carry out audits to ensure they are fully able to undertake this function
- take steps to improve the focus on the individual needs of children and young people within assessments and casework planning
- undertake thematic audits of casework in order to improve understanding of service strengths and weaknesses
- take appropriate action to improve the quality and consistency of assessments.

Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people

Children and young people are safe and feel safe

Grade 3 (adequate)

21. The effectiveness of services in taking reasonable steps to ensure that children and young people are safe is adequate. The inspection of the adoption service by Ofsted in April 2008 judged the service to be good. The Ofsted inspection of the fostering service in November 2009 judged the service to be satisfactory, and the private fostering arrangements inspected by Ofsted in 2009 were judged good. Essex has 10 residential children's homes; two were judged outstanding, three good and five satisfactory.
22. Children and young people at immediate risk of significant harm are identified in a timely way by the countywide IRT. The subsequent response by assessment teams to IRT referrals relating to children and young people at risk of harm is variable. The examination of case files identified that some children and young people are not seen by a social worker within appropriate timescales and that child protection enquiries conducted under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 do not always follow agreed procedures. However, despite the delays in providing services to some children, protective action is taken and there were no cases seen where children and young people were identified as being in immediate risk of harm.
23. There has been significant development of the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) since the last safeguarding and looked after children inspection that took place in June and July 2010. The council currently employs two LADOs and a service manager, and recruitment is about to begin for two more posts in recognition of the need to increase capacity. Development work includes undertaking specific work with colleagues in fostering services to increase understanding and knowledge of the role of the LADO and the processes involved in managing allegations against professionals. As a result, the volume and quality of referrals has increased enabling effective safeguarding provision to be put in place. In addition, awareness raising and liaison with colleagues in IRT, Police Child Abuse Investigation Teams and with schools has improved the effectiveness of LADOs and ensured that they are involved at an early stage in child protection enquiries concerning the children's workforce. The analysis and impact of service delivery is currently underdeveloped. This is however recognised and planning is in place to improve reporting processes to the ESCB.
24. Inspectors' examination of a number of Human Resources recruitment files demonstrates that the statutory minimum requirements are met when

recruiting staff. There is a clear process for the assessment of Criminal Records Bureau checks and with their sign off, and the LADOs are responsible for assessing those with a criminal record history. The case files seen did not always demonstrate that gaps in a candidate's employment history are appropriately followed up.

25. The Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), established to protect vulnerable children and their families from offenders who pose a risk, are robust and well organised. The MARAC arrangements are supported by a wide range of agencies which have signed up to an information sharing agreement. There has been a recent significant increase in referrals as a result of raised awareness through training, and this has led to the need to hold 10 MARAC forums per year to manage the workload. In the past 12 months, 1,656 cases involving 2,145 children have been managed through the MARAC. Regular representation is made by children's services and adult mental health at both MARAC and MAPPA. The co-location of MARAC and MAPPA results in good and timely communication between partners, with meetings held every two months to exchange information.
26. While there is evidence of good working arrangements to respond to, and prevent, incidents of missing children, there is an absence of multi-agency oversight. There is little joint monitoring of the effectiveness of procedures or of the patterns and trends of children who go missing. However social care staff expressed a lack of confidence in the accuracy of the education system's recording of children subject to child protection plans or those that are looked after. In addition, staff do not have access to the children's social care system in order to undertake their own checks. There are high numbers of children being educated at home through elective home education. Capacity is stretched as just two home education advisers are responsible for both overseeing these children and visiting homes at least annually, and more frequently where interventions and support are required. Sound processes are in place to enforce attendance at school through legal meetings and, where needed, the use of school attendance orders.

Quality of provision

Grade 3 (adequate)

27. The quality of provision is adequate. Thresholds for access to children's social care are well established within IRT, and inspectors found clear evidence of effective and robust systems for the assessment and timely processing of all non-domestic abuse contacts. The volume and frequency of domestic abuse contacts from Essex Police has significantly increased during the last six months. The council have dedicated extra resources to address the backlog of domestic abuse notifications, and although at the time of this inspection there was a backlog of over 600 of these contacts to be processed, this total had stood at over 1,600 in July 2011. Some initial screening of the backlog has been carried out by both Police officers

and social care staff. Although this has reduced the risk to children and young people, there is a risk of delay in the provision of safeguarding services to some children and their families within the backlog that have not yet been identified.

28. Early intervention services have continued to develop since the last inspection in the summer of 2010. This progress is well supported by multi-agency allocation groups and school networks which provide effective whole-family focused work. Services are still developing further and there is awareness of the fact that not all areas of the county are served by the networks that currently exist. The council is in the process of securing funding for the expansion of 'edge of care' services to prevent older children and young people from becoming looked after as a result of family breakdown.
29. The council has made significant progress in ensuring that there is no delay in allocating casework appropriately within fieldwork teams and that there is no longer a backlog of unallocated work. However, in some cases there are delays to social workers seeing children in a timely way and the quality of assessments seen was variable. Some assessments were robust, evidence-based pieces of work that led to focused intervention. These included assessments. Where appropriate, research was used to consider the impact of domestic abuse. A larger number, however, were poor both in terms of the focus on risk and also in the development of plans to improve long-term outcomes for the children and young people concerned.
30. The individual needs of children and young people, as defined by their race, culture, religion, language and disability, do not always receive sufficient attention within casework. Only a small number of assessments seen had good examples of the individual needs of children and young people being considered and discussed with those receiving services. In particular, inspectors did not see examples of how cultural norms within families, and factors such as social isolation, poverty and employment, were considered in assessing the risk and circumstances of children and young people.

Ambition and prioritisation

Grade 3 (adequate)

31. Ambition and prioritisation are adequate. The objectives and ambitions of the council in prioritising the safeguarding of children and young people and improving children's services is shared and understood across the council from political leaders and senior officers to front line staff. Elected members have made a commitment to protect front line children's services from budget reductions, and they maintain the strong monitoring of both performance and expenditure within the service. Those staff that met inspectors demonstrated that they have confidence in senior officers and the improvement plan that is being driven forward. The council has

developed and put in place a number of coordinated plans to continue service improvements, such as the restructure of children's services into quadrants, workforce planning, the improvement plan and the more recent refocus of the ESCB and its workstreams.

Leadership and management

Grade 3 (adequate)

32. Leadership and management are adequate. A considerable investment has been made in workforce development by the council in the last 12 months. There has been a rigorous programme of competency-based interviews for some key posts within children's services, and some new posts have been developed to support the restructure into quadrants. Additionally, the recruitment of permanent staff has reduced the reliance on temporary agency staff and increased stability in a number of social work teams. In some teams however, the numbers of agency staff remain high. The council recognises that workforce development and service changes are very much work in progress and the impact in terms of achieving improved outcomes for children and young people are yet to fully emerge.
33. Elected members and senior managers use management information effectively to understand local performance and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the service. During the inspection, senior officers were able to accurately describe the levels of performance found in different offices across the county. The work of the Improvement Board has been successful in assisting with driving up performance and there is no longer a backlog of casework to be allocated. Casework supervision is well evidenced in case files, and the feedback from social workers is that supervision is valued and supportive and that managers are accessible. However the evidence of impact in improving outcomes for children of supervision and wider improvement initiatives is limited. This is particularly the case in respect of the timeliness of seeing children, the frequency of statutory visits and case assessments and planning.
34. The majority of social workers seen by inspectors confirm that regular, supportive and challenging supervision takes place and that accessible managers support them in their work. Staff sickness or vacancies can impact on supervision frequency in individual teams and some staff report that supervision does not allow sufficient time for reflection or development. There is good access to a range of helpful training for social work staff, although this is not always sufficiently targeted at staff for which particular training is a priority, for example there is a shortage of Achieving Best Evidence trained staff in assessment teams and insufficient places available to make up this shortfall. Newly-qualified social workers receive appropriate induction and are supported well by a specific package which includes extra supervision, mentoring and study time as well as reduced caseloads.

35. A variety of work is being undertaken in gaining users' views. For example, a family centre activity day has been held for young people on the edge of care or on child protection plans in order to gain views and to inform service development. The Children in Care (CiC) council provides looked after children, those on the edge of care and young carers the opportunity to give feedback on services and meet with senior managers and elected members. Unaccompanied asylum seekers have a specific group, the young people's diversity group, which has been influential in ensuring appropriate advice for asylum seekers is readily accessible.
36. The stability and capacity of teams is reported to be greatly improved and currently adequate. However, teams are stretched and vulnerable to the impact of sickness or vacancies. Workloads overall are currently manageable but unexpected peaks in demand can quickly lead to staff being overwhelmed. Social workers report inadequate business support resources and are spending considerable time on administrative tasks. The council are aware of these pressures and are reviewing both business support resources and the administrative tasks social workers undertake.

Performance management and quality assurance

Grade 3 (adequate)

37. Performance management and quality assurance are adequate. The council has a comprehensive performance management framework that is supported by skilled technicians. This allows the council to have a clear overview of the work of children's services. In addition, the council has developed a comprehensive audit process that has enabled in excess of 2,500 casework audits to take place. The audit outcomes are collated and overall statistical analysis is used to determine strengths and weaknesses. Although this activity has undoubtedly had a positive impact on improving practice, inspectors found the quality and accuracy of the audits seen to be variable. The audits had not detected specific issues such as delays in seeing children and young people in a timely way.
38. The six case file audits that were prepared for this inspection were not of a high standard. All were over-optimistic, and four in particular failed to highlight all the shortcomings of the casework and did not give an accurate picture of the quality and impact of the work. Arrangements for multi-agency quality assurance of practice through case file audits are at an early stage of development. Two audits seen by inspectors were judged as adequate overall by the auditor, although it was not clear how this judgement had been reached. The audits did identify a number of significant practice issues, including the lack of focus upon fathers, the quality of risk assessments and the poor use of previous histories.

Partnership working

Grade 3 (adequate)

39. The ESCB is currently reviewing its scope and function and is seeking to increase its support for service improvement. Steps are also being taken to ensure that the statutory duties of the ESCB are fully met. The newly appointed independent chair has identified the need to refocus key sub-groups to ensure that they are sufficiently challenging and robust. Positive progress has been made by the board and its representatives from health in identifying and addressing resource issues that impact upon joint working and service delivery for vulnerable children and their families. Governance arrangements have been very recently reviewed and work is underway to ensure that the ESCB takes forward the work of the improvement board once that board is no longer required.
40. Senior managers believe that the newly formed structure of splitting social care services in Essex into quadrants will provide key opportunities to strengthen partnerships and allow the formation of key relationships. Social workers and staff from children's centres and family centres confirm improvements in joint working arrangements, with some examples of strong localised partnerships. For example CAMHS and women's aid staff work together well with family centre staff to provide regular support for families who have experienced domestic abuse. Early intervention services are developing at a fast pace and there are a number of multi-agency partnerships built around school hubs and children's centres.
41. Partnership working with the Police is reported by social workers to be an improving picture, although inspectors identified instances where there is a predominant single agency rather than joint agency focus. For example, inspectors identified a number of examples of Police officers formally interviewing children and young people as part of Section 47 enquiries, without a social worker being present. A lack of Achieving Best Evidence-trained social workers and high social care staff turnover has impacted upon working relationships. Plans to improve these working relationships and more effectively safeguard children are at an early stage of development. The Police and children's services plan to pilot a jointly staffed service to screen and manage the very high number of domestic abuse notifications that are raised by Police officers on a daily basis. The council is aware of the need to take urgent action to address the significant and ongoing issue of the current backlog of domestic abuse referrals.

Record of main findings:

Safeguarding services	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
Capacity for improvement	Adequate
Safeguarding outcomes for children and young people	
Children and young people are safe and feel safe	Adequate
Quality of provision	Adequate
Ambition and prioritisation	Adequate
Leadership and management	Adequate
Performance management and quality assurance	Adequate
Partnership working	Adequate
Equality and diversity	Adequate