

Essex County Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 19 November 2018 to 23 November 2018

**Lead inspector: Tara Geere
Her Majesty’s Inspector**

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

Services for children in Essex have continued to improve since the previous inspection in 2014. Inspirational senior leaders, supported by good corporate and political support and strong partnerships, are tenaciously ambitious for children. They have developed a well-trained, highly skilled workforce. The relationship strengths-based practice model is fully embedded and well understood by partner agencies. Families receive the right help at the right time. Investment in high-quality early help and preventative services supports families to make the positive changes needed to improve their children’s lives and allow them to remain safely at home.

Senior leaders know their communities and services well and are responsive to children’s changing needs and national thinking about best practice. They have combined learning from their own quality assurance and performance management arrangements with peer reviews and inspections to develop a clear self-assessment and to target resources effectively. Innovative practice is having a tangible, positive impact for children and their families. Effective management oversight across Essex ensures that services are of a consistently high standard in all four geographical areas in which children’s services are organised.

What needs to improve

- Consistency in planning for disabled children and care leavers.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are: outstanding

1. Children and families who need help and protection receive a timely, proportionate and highly effective response. The children and families hub provides an efficient single point of entry to early help and children's social care. Staff in the hub quickly and accurately establish the level of risk and need for children. They have a clear focus on supporting children and families with the right level of help at the right time, so that they do not receive statutory intervention unnecessarily.
2. An exceptional early help service makes a significant difference for children and families. The targeted Family Solutions service is highly effective. It carefully considers the needs of individual children, undertaking good-quality early help assessments which lead to effective plans and intervention focused on children's needs. Skilled staff work collaboratively and openly with children, young people and families. This is underpinned by the relationship and strengths-based model of practice, which helps them to understand and explore children's lived experiences and to develop effective and sustainable solutions to effectively address their needs.
3. Creative and effective work with families, including specialist parenting assessments and an extensive group work programme run by family centre workers, is making positive differences to children's lives. Skilful practice ensures that harder-to-engage parents are effectively involved in group work programmes, such as domestic abuse workshops. This is helping to facilitate positive changes in families with complex difficulties.
4. The highly effective model of practice is underpinned by a shared understanding across Essex that children should be supported to grow up in their own families when it is safe for them to do so. Inspectors saw the model fully embedded across all services and teams on this inspection. Staff have a clear understanding of the model, and build strong relationships, getting to know children and families and using family strengths to help identify strategies which enable them to achieve and sustain positive changes and improve outcomes for their children.
5. When children's needs escalate or risks to their welfare increase, highly effective, timely responses at the children and families hub ensure that children's needs are met at the earliest opportunity. Children at immediate risk of significant harm are fast-tracked by the hub and picked up by the relevant

locality-based assessment and intervention team. Timeliness for processing requests for support is consistently good. Ensuring that families get the help and support they need first time round means that re-referral rates in Essex are low.

6. The recent introduction of an easy-to-use electronic referral form is helping to improve both the quality of requests for support or information, and the speed of responses. Parents, carers and members of the public can also use this facility and are increasingly choosing to do so. Staff fully understand parental consent, and inspectors saw it being appropriately sought and recorded. Advice and guidance are readily available, including through a dedicated consultation line for professionals. Those submitting requests for support are routinely informed in writing of the outcome. Considerable work and progress has been made with partners to ensure that the quality of information they provide is of a consistently good standard.
7. Comprehensive and timely two-way communication between the children and families hub and the appropriately resourced emergency duty service helps to ensure that children and families receive an effective response outside of office hours.
8. When risk increases for children, timely, good-quality child protection strategy discussions take place, with consistently good attendance by relevant partners. Strategy discussions make appropriate decisions about the level of risk and swiftly agree actions which are well matched to risks and individual children's needs and circumstances. Section 47 enquiries are timely and thorough, and they clearly demonstrate proportionate, multi-agency decision-making. Children are routinely seen and seen alone when this is appropriate, enabling social workers to gain a clear understanding of their experiences. These robust enquiries provide a solid base for effective planning and interventions for families.
9. Regularly updated, child-focused assessments, including family solutions assessments, are routinely used to inform a range of regular review meetings. Workers use up-to-date chronologies and case histories to ensure a good understanding of children's needs, with issues of diversity appropriately considered in most cases.
10. When the level of risk is such that children require a child protection plan for their needs to be met, child protection conferences are held quickly and are attended by a broad range of relevant agencies. The independent chairs of child protection conferences ensure that those attending balance a strengths-based approach with focusing on what needs to change to make sure that children are protected. This means that child protection plans focus on the right things to effect positive change. Regular and well-attended core group meetings monitor progress effectively and change and develop plans when this is necessary. Consequently, they are an effective forum for improving

outcomes for children. Children are well supported to have their voices heard and they participate meaningfully in the child protection processes. Regular feedback from children and parents is used well in core groups to monitor progress and shape plans.

11. The vast majority of children's plans, including early help and child in need plans, are of a high quality. However, in a small minority of cases involving disabled children, plans could be further strengthened with more time-specific actions and a more ambitious child-focus, to ensure rigour in monitoring the pace of progress. Senior leaders have reviewed disabled children's services and are taking action to strengthen consistency and share the strongest practice across teams.
12. Social workers know children very well. They demonstrate a good understanding of their needs and plans and are passionate about securing and sustaining improvements in their lives. Sensitive, direct work with children is often creative, and is used well to understand individual children's lived experience. Staff tailor their work to children's individual needs and their cultures, nationalities and any disabilities. Direct work takes place at a frequency and pace that is also well matched to their individual circumstances, resulting in children's outcomes improving. Inspectors saw the sensitive exploration of issues during direct work reducing incidents of going missing and allowing children space to reflect on their individual circumstances and inform planning. Visits to children are also matched to their individual needs, often taking place at an impressive frequency above guidance requirements.
13. Management oversight of practice is thoroughly embedded and purposeful. Managers make clear and considered decisions that provide direction and accelerate change for children. These are consistently recorded in assessment reviews and regular supervision. Senior leaders have ensured that all managers have access to training in systemic supervision to build reflective thinking, strengthen relationships and allow workers time to reflect on their impact on children and their families. The majority of supervision records reflect the high quality of supervision reported by social workers, and specific, clear actions are given timescales to allow monitoring of the progression of plans in children's timescales.
14. Essex local authority has a joined-up approach to safeguarding and child protection across the wider workforce, helping to keep children and young people safe. Designated officers make good use of a dedicated allegations management database, and they exercise considerable professional curiosity in rigorously recording, monitoring and, where applicable, coordinating investigations involving adults who work in positions of trust with children and young people. Good awareness and understanding of their role on the part of partner agencies has helped to appropriately extend the designated officers' reach and influence.

15. The county-wide homeless protocol is well understood and consistently applied. When young people aged 16 and 17 are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, their needs are routinely assessed by a social-work qualified homeless youth specialist and a housing colleague. Together, these professionals effectively explore actual or potential risks associated with going missing, criminal and sexual exploitation, and/or other vulnerabilities. They work closely with a range of teams, including the assessment and intervention teams, the divisional based intervention team (D-BIT), youth offending teams and police vulnerability officers in order to provide effective wrap-around help and support for young people, and suitable accommodation where appropriate.
16. Staff respond robustly to the needs of children at risk of child exploitation and those missing from home and/or missing from care. Social workers regularly visit children and talk through missing episodes to understand and explore the risks that children may face. This provides important intelligence through mapping children's links. It is also shared with the hidden harm and missing coordinators and with the multi-agency missing and child exploitation panel to inform disruption activity. Managers are aware that recording of return home interviews through the 'missing chat' procedures is not currently capturing all interventions that children receive following episodes of going missing. They are developing the electronic recording system in order to capture all interventions.
17. The gangs intervention team and community safety partnership groups are working together to enhance the response to wider child exploitation concerns. Effective disruption activities have taken place with partner agencies, such as operations Henderson and Raptor with Essex police. Staff work effectively to reduce harm for children at risk of female genital mutilation and children who are vulnerable to radicalisation.
18. At the time of the inspection, the private fostering team had some staffing pressures negatively impacting on the timeliness of initial visits. Managers are aware of this and are taking appropriate action to increase their monitoring and support for the team. Once children's cases are allocated, high-quality assessments identify children's needs and visiting is in line with these, rather than the regulatory minimum.
19. Essex local authority maintains effective oversight of children who are electively home educated. Leaders review the reasons for pupils being taken out of school and check for any safeguarding concerns. They provide appropriate guidance for parents on how to educate their children at home and inform parents about where they can get extra help. Leaders undertake appropriate checks on the quality of home education and successfully seek to return children to school when they find provision at home to be ineffective.
20. Leaders review the quality of alternative education providers for those not accessing mainstream education in order to ensure that children are safe and

are being provided with an appropriate education. A new system for supporting the education of vulnerable pupils, a vulnerable pupils panel, has recently been introduced, but it was too early to see its impact for children at this inspection.

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

21. The local authority uses the public law outline (PLO) effectively. Managers routinely monitor timescales and final outcomes for children through the legal tracker. Letters to families before proceedings, although clear on risks and potential outcomes if changes cannot be made, are currently too long. Service managers are running workshops to share good practice and improve the quality of letters. Managers closely monitor the progress of cases in PLO through PLO review meetings. Effective engagement through PLO intervention is promoting change within families, resulting in the need for proceedings being averted in nearly half of the cases concerned. This outcome reflects the positive view from the local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service about the local authority's pre-proceedings work.
22. A range of good-quality services, including the highly effective D-BIT, enable children on the edge of care to remain in family arrangements. These services are also very successful in reuniting children and young people in care with their families when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so.
23. Social workers and managers take decisive action when children can no longer live with their families, finding good-quality placements that meet their individual needs. When children are placed out of area, staff visit them regularly and provide good support. Appropriate notifications are made to host authorities, although the local authority is aware of the need to strengthen consultation with host authorities before placing children at a distance.
24. Leaders and managers are focused on strengthening placement stability. Inspectors saw tangible evidence that the recent Department for Education innovation-funded 'Inside Out' project is improving outcomes for children in care who are in crisis, by building effective relationships with independent workers who are able to support them effectively. Local authority foster carers who spoke to inspectors during the inspection commented positively on the high quality of support and training given to them to support children in placement.
25. A full range of permanence options is sensitively considered for children from the earliest stages of case planning onwards. This focus on permanence is reflected in comprehensive children in care plans.
26. Work that the children in care council has undertaken with the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service has strengthened children's participation in the

reviewing process and improved their experience. Children and young people actively decide who will take part in review meetings. IROs closely monitor progress on children's care plans at their reviews, and at mid-points between reviews. They take account of the broad range of children's needs, meeting with children, parents and carers to gain their views and inform planning.

27. Children in care and care leavers enjoy and benefit from a wide range of activities and opportunities that enable them to enjoy life and make good progress. They receive good support, which helps them become physically and emotionally healthier.
28. Children's health needs are promptly assessed through comprehensive and timely health assessments that inform effective health plans. Staff make good use of regular strengths and difficulties questionnaires to assess and sustain progress. Readily accessible mental health coordinators make a positive contribution to children's placement stability and emotional well-being through regular direct work with children and through high-quality consultation and guidance to social workers and foster carers.
29. Social workers and carers ensure that children attend dental and optician appointments and that these are considered during their reviews. During the inspection, the local authority became aware that, while care leavers receive their health histories, arrangements for providing replacements when young people may have lost them were not known to all personal advisers. They immediately reviewed the process and took steps to remind staff of the actions to take in order to address this.
30. Social workers have a thorough understanding of the children they work with and are passionate about improving outcomes for them. Inspectors saw sensitive, creative examples of direct work with children and young people to help them to understand their heritage and individual circumstances and participate in their own planning.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from sensitive and highly effective help and care. Careful consideration of children and young people's needs and tenacity in supporting contact where appropriate are making a positive difference for these children. The local authority has sent social workers to France to undertake best-interest decisions for children to travel to England. This sensitive piece of work is leading to clear assessments of need and timely resources being sourced to meet children's needs from the outset. Staff use the national referral mechanism appropriately when there is evidence to suggest that children and young people have been trafficked, in order to safeguard them from further harm.
32. The achievements of children in care are celebrated well in Essex local authority. The children in care council has a meaningful influence on service restructuring and redesign. Effective examples of children's participation

include the coproduction of the 'Inside Out' project, the strengths-based children in care review process and training for staff.

33. Managers are ambitious in the placement of adoptive children, resulting in well-thought-out, child-centred placements, including for older children and brothers and sisters. Strong adoption services, with a range of creative options available, ensure that children have the best chance of success in their adoptive families.
34. Children in care are supported well in their education. Leaders of the virtual school have high expectations of how education providers will meet children's needs. They meet with providers regularly, using these visits to review children's work, to speak with children and to check on the quality of provision and the quality of all personal education plans. Virtual school staff provide effective training, support and guidance to schools and colleges. They rigorously monitor and support children in care to ensure appropriate access and improve children's progress, attainment and outcomes. Foster carers take an active role in supporting children and young people in their education and see this as vitally important in improving their life chances.
35. Through careful monitoring, senior leaders and managers are aware that the proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training is lower than comparators. They have taken steps to address this, employing additional employment advisers to work with the young people and with education providers, and increasing support for apprenticeships. It was too early to see the impact of this work at the time of this inspection.
36. Care leavers benefit from timely and persistent support by personal advisers, who know them well. Regular care leaver drop-ins with a range of professionals, including refugee, education, employment, benefits and health specialists, provide responsive and helpful support to care leavers. Young people who spoke to inspectors at a drop-in commented positively on how they had been supported with issues such as housing and were signposted to further help when they have needed it. Leaders and managers are aware of the variability in quality of pathway planning. While inspectors saw some good examples, with risks well identified, pathway plans are not always routinely updated or written in child-focused language.
37. Young people are prepared for independence through the provision of support and training in areas such as budgeting. Young people who spoke with inspectors were positive about the support they receive, and the impact that workers are having on their lives. The recent development of the 'thinking ahead' plan is an example of good practice in pathway planning for disabled young people, although this has not been consistently embedded across all areas.

38. Since the last inspection, leaders have improved oversight of service delivery to care leavers. Inspectors saw tenacious work by personal advisers to engage and maintain contact with young people. However, the recent change of electronic recording system has resulted, currently, in a gap in reportable data. Managers are keeping manual records to ensure that the service is able to identify any young people with whom staff are not in touch. Senior leaders are addressing the issue with the provider.

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

39. Senior leaders are unrelenting in their pursuit of excellence for children. They have steadily improved the quality of services since they were judged to be good at the previous inspection in 2014. Purposeful use of feedback from their own quality assurance processes and a range of external reviews further helps to focus service development and improvement. The inspirational director of children's services and her strong senior leadership team have developed a clear vision to improve children lives. They have created a culture in which staff are valued, supported and encouraged to be creative in their practice in order to make a positive difference to children.
40. Staff in the local authority's children's services and in partner agencies value the vision and share the key goal of supporting children to grow up in their own families when it is safe for them to do so. This is ensuring that needs are identified and addressed at the lowest appropriate level of intervention. This leads to real improvements in outcomes for children and their families.
41. The stable group of capable leaders and managers has an unerring focus on improving services and ensuring high aspirations for children. Through its involvement in the national Partners in Practice initiative, Essex is outward facing, supporting a number of other local authorities to strengthen their practice. At the same time, the local authority has continued to improve and sustain the quality and performance of its own services.
42. Highly visible leaders make good use of continuous learning from well-embedded quality assurance audits and regular feedback from children and families, to swiftly and creatively improve services and performance. The local authority has successfully attracted additional funding through the children's social care innovation programme to pilot projects that further improve outcomes for children. Children are actively involved in developing new projects and service redesigns.
43. Leaders and managers have a comprehensive understanding of service strengths and emerging challenges, underpinned by a thorough and accurate self-assessment. They respond promptly and effectively to areas of development, for example by developing an effective gangs intervention team

in response to emerging risks and by purposefully strengthening staffing in the north quadrant to meet a rise in demand.

44. Strong political and corporate support and carefully targeted investment have enabled the local authority to manage demand and prioritise children's needs across the council. This whole-council approach underpins the learning environment in which frontline practice is flourishing. Robust governance arrangements and effective scrutiny of service provision are helping to drive performance.
45. The local authority is a committed and effective corporate parent. Significant investment has been made to support children to live in local foster care placements and further support the effective practice model.
46. Essex has developed robust, mature relationships with partners. This has assisted in the management of complex arrangements, such as the county-wide housing protocol across the 12 district councils to meet the housing needs of young people. The local judiciary, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and a wide range of partners, including school leaders, all comment positively on the highly effective practice to safeguard and care for children in Essex.
47. Senior leaders have invested effectively in the children's workforce. A comprehensive training offer for staff supports the continuous drive for improvement and focus on improving outcomes for children. Staff value the training they receive. Low levels of agency staffing and a timely response to recruitment mean that caseloads are low, giving social workers the time and space to build meaningful relationships and do purposeful work with children and families. Staff enjoy working in Essex; morale and motivation are high. Workers describe the work they are able to undertake with children and families as the reason they came into social work.



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