

Inspection of Kirklees local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 8 to 19 July 2024

Lead inspector: Rachel Griffiths, 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	Good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the previous inspection in 2019 when children's services in Kirklees were judged to require improvement to be good, services have improved. Overall, they are now good. An established and confident leadership team, with committed staff, and strong corporate and political support have driven improvements in the quality and impact of support to children in need of help and protection and children in care. Alongside strategic partners, leaders have developed a range of effective, bespoke services that are meeting local need and making a tangible difference to children's experiences.

Variability remains in the quality and impact of services for care leavers. There are challenges regarding the sufficiency of homes for children in care and care leavers to live in, and with the consistency and quality of written records for children in care and care leavers. For a small number of children who are experiencing harm from neglect and / or domestic abuse, responses are not effective enough. Leaders are fully aware of their challenges and have clear action plans in place to address them.

What needs to improve?

- The availability and choice of homes for children in care and care leavers.
- The quality of written plans, records and meeting minutes for the minority of children in care and care leavers where these documents are weak.
- The effectiveness of practice with every child who is experiencing harm from neglect and / or domestic abuse.

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

1. Overall, children in Kirklees receive effective and responsive help and protection. Those children and families who need early help benefit from a wide range of services and timely interventions to help improve children's experiences.
2. When children are referred into the front door, they receive a timely, effective, and proportionate response. Skilled social workers understand and consistently apply thresholds. They carefully consider children's experience and histories, and they fully understand the effect of cumulative harm. Social workers gain parental consent and override this if required to ensure children's safety and well-being.
3. The out-of-hours service responds to children's and families' needs in a timely and effective way.
4. When children are at risk of harm, timely and well-attended strategy meetings enable effective information-sharing and multi-agency decision-making in children's best interests. The social workers undertaking child protection enquiries see children quickly and listen carefully to their views. The outcomes of these enquiries are, for most children, appropriate, ensuring that children are only subject to statutory intervention when necessary.
5. For children in need of statutory help, social workers undertake detailed and thorough assessments of their needs. Social workers gain children's, parents' and other professionals' views, alongside a consideration of family history. This helps social workers to understand and analyse key areas of need. Social workers regularly update assessments in response to changes in need or circumstance, to inform planning.
6. When children need either help or protection, for most, their child-in-need or child protection plans are clear and easy for parents to understand. Most plans have actions with clear timescales, and, for most children, the actions from plans are improving their circumstances.
7. There is a strong emphasis by workers to help children to remain safely within their family network. Families are offered family group conferences at the

earliest opportunity, where they are supported to develop their own plans to help ensure that children can remain at home with appropriate levels of support. Family group conferencing is a strength and is making a positive difference to children's and families' experiences.

8. Regular multi-agency reviews of children's plans enable an effective review of the progress being made. Social workers work sensitively with parents and children to enable their full participation in reviews. These reviews usually result in clear outcomes and actions that are focused on improving children's lives.
9. For a small number of children who have been experiencing cumulative harm from domestic abuse or neglect, social workers have been overly optimistic about the level of parental change being achieved. For some children, this has resulted in their cases stepping down from child protection plans too quickly, or stepping down to early help, only for them to step back up for further statutory intervention because change has not been sustained.
10. Social workers in the assessment and intervention teams have regular supervision, which results in clear actions to inform planning. For a small number of children, a lack of management challenge to social work recommendations results in interventions ending too early.
11. Social workers engage with and assess parents who have previously had children removed, in the early stages of their new pregnancy. Because of the detailed planning and support provided, more children have safely remained in their parents' care.
12. When risks to children escalate, children appropriately enter the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. Letters given to parents before proceedings clarify exactly what needs to change and by when, and what help and support they will be provided to achieve this. Managers and leaders robustly oversee children in pre-proceedings to ensure that timely and effective work is completed, to enable children to step down from pre-proceedings because positive change has been achieved, or for a court application to be issued.
13. Social workers know their children and families well. Social workers regularly visit children and undertake sensitive, direct work to help them understand their world.
14. Children who are at risk of exploitation in Kirklees benefit from a strong multi-agency response that helps to reduce risk to children and disrupt the activities of exploiters. Children at risk of exploitation build meaningful relationships with workers, who frequently update risk assessments in line with changing circumstances, harm and threat.
15. Children living in private fostering arrangements are well supported. Assessments are comprehensive and social workers undertake nuanced work to support children and their carers.

16. When children aged 16 to 17 become homeless, a timely, joined-up response from children's services and housing means that children are appropriately supported. Practitioners inform children of their rights and entitlement to become looked after and, when required, find them a suitable home to live in.
17. Disabled children receive a range of effective services and comprehensive packages of support. Social workers regularly update children's assessments, to inform plans so that they continue to meet children's needs.
18. Social workers understand the challenges faced by young carers. Young carers receive timely and effective support from both social workers and youth engagement workers.
19. The local authority designated officer service is effective, ensuring a timely and proportionate response to children at risk of harm from professionals.
20. Leaders have realigned the responsibilities of teams involved with supporting and monitoring the welfare of children who are missing education and those who are electively home educated. Clearly defined roles ensure that those involved with these groups of children provide clear oversight and support. Strong partnership working between the virtual school, social care, and inclusion ensure that children and their families receive the support that they need.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

21. Most children come into care in a planned and timely way, and the majority of children receive a good service that results in their life experiences improving.
22. Achieving permanence for children at the earliest opportunity is a priority in Kirklees. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) make permanence recommendations early. Social workers consider all permanence options for children and, where possible, they support children to live with family or friends. After thorough assessments of family and friend carers, a high number of children achieve permanence via special guardianship orders (SGOs). This has been a very positive outcome for many children.
23. If children are unable to safely remain within their family network and adoption is not a viable option, social workers seek to match children in permanent foster homes. Arrangements to track children's progress towards permanence in this way have been strengthening but are still to be fully embedded. This means that for some children living in foster care, certainty about their permanence plan is not achieved at the earliest opportunity.
24. When a child's permanence plan is one of adoption, social workers complete thorough and sensitive child permanence reports, demonstrating a good understanding of children's needs. Social workers appropriately consider early permanence homes, which means children can live with their prospective adopters at the earliest opportunity.

25. The relationship between the local authority and regional adoption agency (One Adoption) is strong. Effective management oversight and panel arrangements ensure that decision-making for children with adoption plans is prompt. This results in the timely identification of well-matched prospective adopters, with social workers paying particular attention to children's cultural and identity needs.
26. When children in care are placed at home with their parents, comprehensive assessments ensure that the arrangements meet children's needs, and they are safeguarded. When a child's plan is to return home, very effective support from a multi-systemic therapy team is helping to ensure a successful and safe transition back home for the child. When appropriate, the local authority makes timely applications to discharge care orders and end prolonged statutory intervention.
27. Social workers know their children well. They visit them regularly and in timescales that meet children's needs. Social workers are stable and consistent, and they have positive relationships with children. Direct work undertaken by social workers and members of the emotional health and well-being service helps children to express their views and to understand their journey into care. Many children also benefit from the support of advocates and independent visitors.
28. Social workers regularly update assessments of children's needs, which then inform up-to-date care plans. The quality of the written plans is variable. On occasion, language is used that is not child friendly. Social workers do not consistently write plans and records in a way that will help children to understand who will be helping them achieve their goals and how.
29. IROs visit children and monitor their progress between reviews. Some IROs provide clear oversight and direction; however, this is not consistent. IROs do not consistently write review minutes in a language that children would easily understand.
30. Social workers carefully consider children's family time arrangements. The arrangements are well thought out and led by children's views and needs. This leads to children being able to maintain relationships with people who are important to them.
31. When children in care are at risk of exploitation or going missing, a strong multi-agency response helps to keep children safer.
32. Children in care benefit from an effective emotional well-being service. Timely and bespoke packages of support are helping children emotionally, and helping carers to develop insight, understanding and skills to better support children through trauma. This is helping to improve relationships between carers and children and improve placement stability.

33. Initial health assessments have become timelier because of increased capacity to undertake these. These assessments, and timely review health assessments, alongside regular dental and optician appointments are helping to ensure that children's physical health needs are met.
34. The virtual school ensures that there is a clear focus on the academic and developmental needs of children. Personal education plans set out the overview of children's needs. Actions to address these needs are clearly mapped out. Children usually make expected progress against these actions. Children are supported to participate in a wide range of enriching activities in line with their interests. This supports the development of children's confidence and widens their peer network.
35. Most children in care live in stable foster placements that meet their needs to a good standard. Foster carers benefit from sustained and well-established support groups. These arrangements provide strong and positive networks for children and their carers, supporting placement stability and carer retention.
36. Social workers support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children well. Social workers understand children's cultural and ethnic identity needs, along with their educational and health needs. Social workers advocate to ensure that children's needs are met.
37. Some older children aged 16 and 17 live in supported accommodation. Most are making progress in these placements. However, there is inconsistency in the management oversight and written rationale for children moving into supported accommodation rather than a home that provides care for them.
38. For a small but significant number of children, their entries into care have been on an unplanned or emergency basis, including via the police using their powers of protection. Due to a lack of emergency placements, this resulted in a very small number of children who needed to come into care out of hours staying overnight in a hotel, supervised by local authority staff, before a more suitable home was found the following day.
39. Local sufficiency challenges have led to a very small number of children under the age of 16 being placed in supported accommodation by necessity, which is outlawed by regulation. This is effectively creating unregistered children's homes. Leaders, managers and social workers closely monitor these children's safety and welfare, and consistent efforts continue to be made to quickly find appropriate registered children's home placements for them.
40. A small number of children are involved in participation opportunities to help improve services through the children in care council. This enables those involved to share experiences and make a difference to service development. Leaders recognise that there is more to do and have plans in place to broaden membership to the children in care council to maximise impact.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good

41. Care leavers do not receive a consistently good service. While there are strengths within the service, there remains variability in the quality of pathway plans, the local offer is not accessible enough to care leavers, and there is not enough suitable accommodation for care leavers.
42. The transition to the care leaver service is effective, as personal advisers (PAs) have already developed purposeful and meaningful relationships with children in advance of them turning 18.
43. Care leavers benefit from enduring and consistent relationships with PAs, who know them well. PAs are persistent, kind, and visit care leavers at a frequency that meets their needs. Care leavers who met inspectors spoke with genuine warmth and enthusiasm about the help and support they receive from their PAs.
44. The health and well-being offer for care leavers is a strength of the service. Access to the emotional well-being service up to the age of 25, with no waiting time, means that care leavers can access therapy and support when they need it. This has had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of many care leavers.
45. Care leavers receive comprehensive and informative health histories when they turn 18. This means that they have important information about their lives and where to access health advice in the future, should they need this. Care leavers also have access to key documents, such as passports and National Insurance numbers.
46. Care leavers continue to receive support for as long as they require it after turning 21. As a result, care leavers know that they always have somewhere to go and someone to speak to whenever they need it.
47. When care leavers are vulnerable or at risk of exploitation, PAs, alongside partners, take effective and protective action to help keep them safer.
48. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers live in accommodation that meets their needs and in communities that they feel safe in. PAs support unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers with their applications for immigration status, and support them to be aspirational in their future educational or career choices.
49. PAs are persistent in their contact, advice and guidance for young parents. Effective and inclusive group work, based at one of the two care leaver hubs, is helping care leavers to develop skills and important links within their communities.

50. PAs regularly visit care leavers who are in custody and ensure that care leavers know that they have someone who cares about them. PAs provide care leavers in custody with effective support to enable their transition back into the community.
51. PAs, with the support of a dedicated careers officer for care leavers, help care leavers into employment, education or training, in line with their wishes and abilities. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, PAs, with the support of the careers adviser and the virtual school, persist to help care leavers back into education, training or employment.
52. A number of care leavers continue to live with their former foster carers when they turn 18. This ensures longer and more lasting links with carers who they know and are familiar with, before taking their next step into adult life.
53. Pathway plans for care leavers are variable in quality and impact. While some are comprehensive and co-produced with care leavers, others are too general in their actions and timescales. Most importantly, care leavers who spoke to inspectors described their pathway plans as ineffective and meaningless.
54. The care leaver offer is not easily accessible, and care leavers do not always know what is available to them or how to access the services available to them. Leaders are aware of this, and the planned relaunch of the local offer and care leavers' website took place during the inspection.
55. Some care leavers are living in unsuitable temporary housing arrangements due to insufficient accommodation being available in Kirklees. A small but significant number of care leavers are living in bed and breakfast accommodation. While these care leavers are risk assessed by housing partners, and regular management monitoring of the accommodation takes place, for these care leavers, this has a negative impact on their sense of stability. It also places them in a vulnerable position, living alongside unknown or homeless people from the wider population. Leaders are progressing clear plans to address this shortfall, with an aim to eradicate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, but it is too soon to see the full impact.
56. Until recently, care leavers have had limited formal opportunities to prepare to live independently. Leaders, in partnership with the Huddersfield Town Foundation, have developed a preparation for independence course. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this.
57. Care leavers have the opportunity to participate with the care leavers' forum. The group participates in a range of activities. Services are increasingly being improved, with care leavers making important contributions to the design and development of them.

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

58. With strong political and corporate support, and committed staff, leaders have been successful in improving the quality and impact of social work practice with children and families. Leaders have a thorough understanding of the service and have realistic improvement plans in progress for those areas that still require further development.
59. Senior leaders model their commitment to getting things right for children. The ethos and aspiration of leaders to prioritise family and friend networks to ensure that children can remain within their family and wider support networks, where possible, are shared throughout the workforce. This is resulting in many children successfully remaining safely with their parents or securing permanence via SGOs. This is a real strength, and it is impacting positively on many children's lives.
60. Strategic partnerships are largely effective. For example, the virtual school has ensured that children benefit from the effective use of resources to improve their educational outcomes. Leaders know that there is some work to do with the police to ensure that there is a more effective joint approach to the emergency protection of children.
61. With local partners, leaders have developed bespoke services to meet local need. A multi-agency, child-centred approach to support children at risk of exploitation is an example of strategic partners enabling effective multi-agency operations. Further examples are provided through a well-developed and impactful family group conferencing service, a youth engagement service, the new beginnings model, a multi-systemic therapy service, and an emotional well-being service for children in care and care leavers. All these operations are having a tangible, positive impact on children's lives.
62. Senior, political and corporate leaders have shown ambition to improve the experiences of children in care and care leavers. This is evidenced by the recent broadening of the membership of the corporate parenting board. Leaders know that there is more to do to achieve their ambitions for every child in care and care leaver, by tackling sufficiency challenges and strengthening the links between the corporate parenting board and the children in care council, so that they have a greater impact on service development.
63. Senior leaders in Kirklees have an accurate and realistic understanding of the strengths of children's services and the challenges that remain. The authority's recent self-evaluation reflects this and informs service priorities, such as the sufficiency of homes for children in care and care leavers. Actions to address this, as outlined in the authority's sufficiency strategy, are well underway, but it is too soon for the impact to be fully evident.

64. Since the previous inspection, leaders have invited and welcomed external scrutiny, and they have learned from inspection findings. This has informed service restructuring in the assessment and intervention teams and the development of services for children at risk of exploitation. Social workers are mostly positive about the changes made.
65. Leaders have transformed quality assurance processes. Multi-agency practice reviews, audits, targeted dip sampling, collaborative learning conversations, feedback from children and families, and responding to complaints and compliments are giving leaders an accurate line of sight into frontline practice. Learning from quality assurance activities, shared via practice learning days, is well received by practitioners.
66. Leaders are also using improved performance data and quality assurance information to strategically respond to areas identified for improvement. For example, quality assurance activities highlighted a need to improve oversight of children in care awaiting permanence via long-term fostering to prevent unnecessary delay. In response, leaders have developed a 'finding and matching' panel to address this.
67. Frontline managers have oversight of children's assessments and plans, and staff receive regular case supervision that they report is helpful. The quality of written supervision records is variable, with a lack of evidence of reflection and detailed scrutiny to inform planning and the progression of children's cases. For a small number of children, this contributes to the limited impact of social work intervention and in achieving sustained positive changes in their life. Management oversight regarding placing older children in supported accommodation and care leavers in temporary accommodation is not consistent in its rationale for these decisions.
68. Recruitment and retention in Kirklees have not been without some challenges and, as a result, caseloads for some social workers and PAs are higher than leaders would aspire to. Managers closely monitor caseloads so that they do not become unmanageable or negatively impact on the quality of work. Despite this, staff morale is high, staff feel valued by managers at every level, and they like working in Kirklees.
69. The culture created by leaders has ensured that there is a workforce of skilled practitioners who are highly committed to children in Kirklees. Many practitioners have chosen to remain working for Kirklees for long durations. A learning culture and training and development opportunities, which include both national and local training events, contribute to this. A comprehensive workforce development strategy supports the ongoing recruitment and retention of social workers, and this includes a strong offer to newly qualified social workers.

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