

# Inspection of York local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 7 March to 18 March 2022

**Lead inspector:** Matt Reed, Her Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the last inspection in 2016, there has been a decline in the quality of children's services in the City of York. There is significant variation in the quality of services and social work practice provided to children and families.

Senior leaders are aware of the decline and an improvement board has been in place since 2019, coupled with significant investment. Following the arrival of the interim DCS, there has been some recent improvement but the pace of change has been too slow. Areas for improvement, identified in a 2018 joint targeted area inspection and a 2019 Ofsted focus visit, have yet to be fully addressed.

There are some teams that offer effective services, such as the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), targeted early help and the virtual school. Developments in the vast majority of other teams have started to show some improvement, but they are not fully effective or embedded to ensure consistently good services to all children and families.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff have been supported, which has enabled them to continue to work with children and families.

## **What needs to improve?**

- The consistency of written records so that they provide an accurate account of decision-making for all children.
- The quality of assessments to ensure that they consistently inform care planning.
- The effectiveness of social work supervision in progressing plans for children and addressing practice shortfalls.
- The analysis of return home interviews.
- Responses to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.
- The pace of planning for children in unregistered children's homes.
- Children's influence and attendance at the corporate parenting board.

## **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good**

1. When children are in need of help and protection, the MASH provides an effective single point of contact for all concerns about children. The MASH is made up of representatives from a range of agency partners. This partnership approach enables children, young people and families to access the right level of support as quickly as possible. MASH social workers receive effective management oversight to help them identify and prioritise the response to needs and risk. Children and families are signposted to the most appropriate service according to the identified threshold of need. A daily multi-agency meeting ensures that referrals in relation to domestic abuse incidents are triaged and prioritised. Where consent from parents is needed to undertake further assessment, this is appropriately considered.
2. When children and families need a lower-level intervention, an effective targeted early help service prevents escalation to statutory services for many children. Skilled practitioners in the targeted early help team provide direct support and work as part of a multi-agency team around the child to reduce risk and need. When risks to children escalate, children are appropriately stepped up to statutory services. While targeted early help services are mostly effective, in a small number of children's cases seen, inspectors found over-optimism in social care assessments and decisions to ask partner agencies to act as lead professionals and meet children's needs. This leads to some children being referred back to the MASH and being subject to repeat interventions.
3. Where children are in need of protection, strategy meetings are timely and well attended by relevant professionals. They share information that leads to appropriate decision-making and action to safeguard children. Subsequent child protection enquiries are child-centred and thorough, which aids the decision-making about next steps.
4. Child protection conferences are timely for children. They are well attended by agency partners and involve families effectively in the discussions. Child protection conferences lead to appropriate outcomes and the development of

effective child protection plans. Most core groups are well attended, but they do not routinely update the plan, and not all conferences or plans are sufficiently focused on the child's experiences to ensure timely progress against actions identified.

5. Not all social work assessments adequately consider or understand the child's experience and history. Some are overly long and lack evaluation. This leads to plans for some children which are not identifying their needs appropriately, the risk to which they are exposed or the required service response.
6. Where children have a disability, assessments of their needs and risks vary in quality. Assessments have a strong focus on health and clinical needs, which for a small number of children results in wider support being overlooked. This creates delays for some children and families receiving support to meet all needs. However, when families receive support from the health and disability team, workers are effective at supporting parents to meet their children's additional needs.
7. Where children and families are subject to pre-proceedings, management oversight is effective for most children. There is a detailed tracker which enables effective oversight for the majority of children and their plans are progressing. However, for a very small number of children, a lack of timely decisions has resulted in children remaining in situations of harm for too long.
8. Some children remain in neglectful situations for too long. The effects of cumulative harm on children are not well understood and analysed within assessments to inform case planning. As a result, there is over-optimism on the part of workers and managers about the progress made by some families. This means that, for a small number of children, their lives do not significantly improve, and families do not sustain change and are subjected to repeat interventions.
9. Direct work is completed with children. The quality of this is variable. Some children benefit from thoughtful work by social workers that is tailored to their age and development, and provides an understanding of their world and experiences. Some work was not well considered, and this was particularly so when children had additional communication needs. Insufficient efforts to communicate with these children directly limit any insight into their views and experiences. Therefore, the planning for some children was not fully informed by the child's views.
10. Private fostering arrangements are appropriately assessed and supported effectively.
11. When children aged 16 or 17 present as homeless to the MASH, they are appropriately referred for assessment by a youth worker in the housing department. It is not clear from social care records that children have been made aware of their rights or offered services as a child in need. This does mean that some children who present as homeless are left in vulnerable living situations.
12. The exploitation team works effectively with many children and agency partners to reduce risk and promote better outcomes. However, not all children who are at

risk of exploitation benefit from this service. In other social work teams, exploitation screening tools are not routinely updated to inform planning and the level of support required. As a result, there are some children who have been left vulnerable to further exploitation.

13. The response to children who go missing from home or care is not effective for all children to ensure that all risks are sufficiently considered. Trained volunteers, independent to the child, complete return home interviews. However, the analysis of information by social workers is weak and there are missed opportunities to explore reasons for going missing and potential risk factors. If children are missing on multiple occasions, each incident is considered separately and therefore services are not sufficiently coordinated to reduce the risk of going missing for all children.
14. The local authority designated officer provides an effective response to allegations against those working in roles with children.
15. When parents choose to electively home educate their children, the local authority response is robust. It fulfils the statutory requirements and ensures that children are supported back to school when appropriate.
16. When children are missing education, appropriate action is taken to identify children if it is believed that they have moved within the United Kingdom. If children are identified as having additional vulnerabilities, they are appropriately referred to children's social care. However, checks of pupils who are believed to have left the country are not as robust and not all steps are taken to identify their final destinations. This means a small number of vulnerable pupils are not being tracked as effectively.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good**

17. The decision for children to come into care is timely for most children. Family members are appropriately assessed to enable children to remain safely within the wider family network where appropriate to do so.
18. Applications to court are appropriate and timely for most children, but social workers' evidence to court is not of a consistently high quality. While initial applications clearly identify the local authority concerns, final statements do not articulate the local authority plan for the child effectively. As a result, this has led to delays in securing permanence decisions for some children.
19. When children return to live with parents on legal orders, the decision-making process is not always robust. Not all arrangements are based on a clear assessment of parental capacity to meet children's needs or have the appropriate level of management oversight.
20. Children in care are seen regularly by their social workers and they are seen alone where appropriate. However, not all children benefit from direct work to inform ongoing assessment care planning. Not all children have been helped to understand their life history and the rationale for decisions made about them.

This has resulted in some children having significant gaps in their life history and understanding why they are in care.

21. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) oversee children's plans effectively and ensure that realistic plans for permanence are progressed. Permanence plans are considered at the earliest opportunity and are achieved in a timely way for many children.
22. Children's reviews are held regularly, and children are encouraged to participate, either directly or through prior conversations with the IRO. Children are routinely offered advocacy and independent visitors to ensure that they are supported. Many children benefit from longer-term relationships with IROs who know them well. The quality of review records can vary. Most are written to the child, which will assist them to understand the rationale for decisions. Others are recorded more as updates without a clear sense of the experiences and views of the child, and will not provide such a clear understanding of decisions about them should they access records at a later date.
23. 'Show Me I Matter' and 'I Still Matter' are small groups which represent the views of children in care and care leavers, respectively. They meet regularly and have provided support to each other during the pandemic. However, the children in these groups do not feel listened to by their corporate parents and have not been able to have a significant influence on the development of policy and practice.
24. Children in care and care leavers are not having all their emotional needs addressed effectively. Children's physical health needs are clearly identified, and children are supported to remain physically healthy. However, reduced capacity in child and adolescent mental health services and other commissioned services has meant delays for some children having their emotional needs addressed.
25. Children in care are encouraged to learn and are supported to do so by a highly effective virtual school that acts as a passionate advocate for them. The virtual school headteacher has high expectations for pupils in York. Personal education plans are reviewed termly and are strongly focused on improving individual pupils' outcomes. The virtual school works closely with schools, including the provision of bespoke training on attachment and trauma, to ensure that the education needs of children in care are met.
26. Most children live in homes that are stable and meet their needs, but a small number of children experience too many moves before finding a settled home. Children are supported to live with brothers and sisters where that is in their best interests. Family time is promoted to ensure that children can safely maintain relationships with significant family members.
27. The local authority has a small number of children under 16 who are living in unregistered children's homes. They are subject to regular multi-agency reviews and have a high level of staffing, which provides additional safeguards. However, care planning has not been timely, which has resulted in uncertainty about the children's living arrangements and has had a negative impact on the emotional well-being of these children. This has led to further unregistered placement moves.

28. The recruitment of foster carers has not been sufficient to address the shortage of in-house foster placements. Recruitment activity is low and has not kept pace with demand. Foster carers have access to good online training and look forward to face-to-face training resuming. Foster carers spoken to by inspectors gave polarised views on the support they have received. Some have been well supported by consistent workers who have enabled them to provide quality care to children. For others, high rates of worker absence and large gaps in supervision have resulted in them being isolated and feeling unsupported in their caring role.
29. Assessments of adoptive carers are completed promptly. The local authority benefits from being part of a regional adoption agency (One Adoption North), which widens the pool of prospective adopters to meet demand. Early permanence planning is embedded, with an increasing number of adopters considering this option. Adopters have access to a range of post-adoption support services and report high-quality support from their adoption workers.
30. Care leavers are well supported by personal advisers who know them well. They are seen at a frequency that meets their needs and face-to-face visits are supplemented by telephone calls and online contact to ensure ongoing communication. Most care leavers are aware of their rights and entitlements. Pathway plans are regularly reviewed and updated with care leavers to ensure continued support, which is enabling them to lead independent lives.
31. Care leavers' health needs are addressed within the pathway plan and care leavers are signposted to appropriate services to meet their needs. However, there is no mechanism for health histories to be provided to care leavers.
32. Most care leavers live in suitable accommodation. 'Staying put' arrangements are promoted, which provide consistency of care for some. The accommodation officer in the pathway team assists care leavers to consider their options and enables them to find the most suitable accommodation. Some care leavers benefit from accessing a trainer flat to experience independent living, which assists them to make informed choices about their next accommodation options.
33. Care leavers are supported to access opportunities for education, training and employment. The virtual school ensures that the local authority careers service meets with children as they approach 16 to ensure a record of their aims for the next few years. As a result of effective support to achieve these aims, rates of post-16 not in education, employment or training have reduced. An education, training and employment support worker in the pathway team provides effective support, identifying and supporting care leavers to attend training and education opportunities. As a result of the support received, many care leavers are in education, employment or training and aspirations are raised.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good**

34. Since the last inspection in 2016, when York children's services were judged to be good, the quality of services to children and families has not been maintained.

This has been recognised by leaders and, in 2018, an improvement board was established to provide oversight and scrutiny of this work. Although there has been some improvement, areas for improvement identified in the 2019 joint targeted area inspection and the 2019 Ofsted focused visit have yet to be fully addressed. While the pandemic has had a negative impact on the pace of improvement, improvement has been slow overall and has not resulted in consistently good services to children. There has been a recent acceleration to service improvements following the arrival of the interim DCS, but these are not fully embedded to demonstrate sustained change.

35. The local authority responded swiftly to the challenges of the pandemic. Working practices were adapted and additional support provided to enable workers to continue to work with children.
36. The chief operating officer and elected members are well informed and clearly sighted on where improvements are needed. There is commitment to ensure that the needs of children are prioritised and corporate investment to support initial and ongoing changes. They recognise that corporate parenting arrangements need to be strengthened. Children and young people report not being sufficiently listened to by corporate parents to have had an influence on practice. Only recently, as part of a revised corporate parenting strategy, have children and young people been invited to attend the corporate parenting board, and there has been a missed opportunity to access the unique insights of those who are, or have been, in care.
37. Senior leaders have ensured that relationships with key partners support effective work with many families. The local authority is an active participant in the local family justice board and has engaged with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to address some regional issues. However, relationships with the courts are not as positive and a lack of confidence in local authority practice and planning has affected court timescales for a small number of children.
38. Senior managers are open to challenge and have engaged in peer reviews to establish a more objective oversight of service quality. Senior managers know themselves well; the self-evaluation provides a realistic view of the quality of services currently. Senior managers are aware of, and have plans to address, the areas for improvement highlighted by inspectors and recognise the need to accelerate the changes. Senior managers have access to good-quality data. Regular performance management meetings support leaders' understanding of trends and vulnerabilities, which supports development work.
39. Senior managers acknowledge that the quality assurance framework was not providing an accurate assessment of the quality of work and children's experiences. It focused too greatly on timescales and audits were too optimistic about the quality of service provided, and this was seen in audits reviewed by inspectors. A new framework has recently been implemented to provide a greater focus on the experiences and outcomes for children. This has been received positively by workers, but is not fully embedded to enable it to have a significant impact on service delivery.

40. The local authority adopted a model of practice in 2018 to address the decline in practice quality. The aim is to promote reflective practice, and a consistent focus on outcomes for children. This has not been embedded effectively and this is contributing to ongoing inconsistency in the quality of service which children receive.
41. There is a lack of suitable in-house residential and fostering placements. This, alongside a reduction in commissioned services to support children's mental health and emotional well-being, has also restricted access to support for some children and families, which has not been addressed effectively. The sufficiency strategy is being reviewed in recognition that the local authority has not been able to meet the needs of all children locally.
42. Leaders have created additional social work capacity to ensure that social workers have manageable caseloads and are supported to develop relationships with children. Although most caseloads are at manageable levels, staff turnover has resulted in some children experiencing a number of changes of social worker. Recently, a social work career grade has been agreed on to support a clear career progression for social workers and assist with recruitment and retention issues. In addition, a social work academy has been created to support social workers in the early years of their career.
43. While social workers receive regular supervision from line managers, supervision is not consistently effective in identifying where drift and delay is occurring in children's assessments and plans. Supervision is not consistently identifying practice shortfalls or helping workers to reflect on the quality of how children are helped and protected.
44. Some workers have felt unsettled by recent changes and turnover of staff. However, overall, most were positive about working for York and the support they receive.
45. Social workers can access developmental opportunities and there is a training offer available to support this. However, some workers reported being unable to take advantage of this due to service pressures, which have restricted their development.

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