

Inspection of Norfolk local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 February 2026

Lead inspector: Rodica Cobarzan, His 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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children in Norfolk receive consistently strong services that impact positively on their and their families' lives. Since the previous inspection in November 2022, leaders have relentlessly continued to strengthen and enhance practice for children, young people and families. Inspirational strategic and operational leadership, alongside child-centred corporate and political support, has enabled the council to further embed its shared partnership framework Flourish, which captures what is most important to children and young people. Partners' confidence and commitment to this strategy have enabled a high-quality, collaborative and integrated system of support for children.

The implementation of the family help model has successfully brought together targeted early help and statutory services in multidisciplinary teams. Consequently, children and families receive seamless coordinated support and effective safeguarding services, reducing the likelihood of more intrusive intervention. The introduction of non-negotiable practice standards has strengthened the consistent, high-quality delivery of services across the council's large geographical area, particularly for children in care and care leavers.

Leaders at all levels ensure that there is an organisational culture in which children and care leavers come first. Listening to children and young people remains central to practice. Their views are heard, their successes are celebrated and their feedback is acted on, so that services continue to evolve to meet their needs.

What needs to improve?¹

- Stronger recognition and consideration of young carers who receive statutory services, building on existing community support. (outcome 1, national framework)

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

1. Children in need of help and protection benefit from the input from high-quality multidisciplinary teams, alongside coordinated input from a wider group of professionals, that improves their lives and helps to reduce their levels of risk and need. Children are supported within a mature and comprehensive targeted early help system, where they receive strong assessments and help in the community or from family help teams. Most children benefit from skilful interventions; family group decision-making is used early, and management oversight keeps children's experiences and progress in clear focus. Early and targeted help allows children and families to receive the support they need and make progress, and reduces the need for further intervention. For most children, early help practitioners recognise when needs change and work closely with the children's advice and duty service (CADS) to ensure that risks to children are appropriately identified and responded to.
2. Responses to contacts and referrals are prompt and proportionate. Short delays are due to attempts to gather additional information and access the help that children and families need. Managers and consultant practitioners complete extensive checks that strengthen analysis and direct clear next steps for children.
3. Well-established partnership working within CADS supports a swift and child-centred response to domestic abuse. Effective information-sharing ensures that when risks escalate, appropriate safety planning is implemented to safeguard children. Risks are well understood and support is offered to victims, including from specialist domestic abuse advisers.
4. The emergency duty service provides timely and effective safeguarding support out of hours. This work is supported by the outreach crisis team, whose work is

¹ The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

a key strength, offering impactful in-person support to children and families outside usual working hours.

5. The Enhanced Family Help team, together with the other specialist teams, provides highly effective, relationship-based support, with thorough assessments and practical help that assist most parents to make and sustain changes. This is particularly evident for children who experience chronic neglect, when the enhanced support is tailored and addresses the root causes of neglect in a structured and proactive way. Some of these effective interventions include specialist guidance to parents from a clinician and daily visits to children to support them to attend school or appointments.
6. Assessments of children's needs, including pre-birth work across services, are comprehensive and child focused. Multi-agency input is a clear strength and structured tools are used to inform assessments. Assessment work for mothers and fathers is enhanced by access to specialist input, including intensive support practitioners, video interactive guidance to promote attachment between children and parents, and domestic abuse practitioners. Plans for children, including disabled children, are regularly updated, with children, parent and carer voices taking centre stage. Multidisciplinary group supervision provides consistent oversight, allowing professionals from different disciplines to plan and review the most effective support for children and families. This support helps to improve children's and families' circumstances to prevent children becoming subject to child protection planning.
7. Social workers and family help practitioners know children very well and undertake purposeful direct work and interventions. Visits to children are regular, extensive and well planned. Children and families actively contribute to their plans. The multidisciplinary approach creates a 'team around the family' model that supports children and families extremely well. Family networks are explored consistently, resulting in well-developed family-led plans.
8. When children's needs escalate or they are at risk of harm, strategy meetings are convened promptly. Meetings are well attended by professionals involved with the children. Information-sharing enables robust analysis, with clear consideration of protective factors and risks. Child protection experts chair these meetings effectively to consider next steps and review children's safety. Contingency planning is thorough.
9. Child protection conferences are timely and strengths based. Children are well prepared to attend meetings through sensitive direct work, so that their voices are heard. Conference minutes are appropriately detailed and reflect high oversight from the chair, along with professionals' contributions and views of risks, the parental voice and the support that children and families need.
10. Oversight of children who are subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) has been strengthened since the last inspection. This work is

mostly timely and well coordinated. Children and parents benefit from strong support to manage risks, which has helped to reduce the need for care proceedings for many children.

11. Children who are missing, experiencing exploitation or at risk of extra-familial harm receive targeted and highly individualised support from a range of specialist teams and services. A well-embedded pathway via CADS, a multi-agency screening process, the effective use of the missing and child exploitation (MACE) team and child planning processes support the identification of risk and vulnerabilities. Weekly adolescent panels are held in each area to facilitate multidisciplinary conversations and guide decisions about required support. The targeted youth support service (TYSS), risk outside the home team (ROTH) and New Roads (residential and outreach hub) provide a wide range of one-to-one support, build relationships with children quickly and work purposefully to help understand, manage and reduce risks. New Roads hubs provide extensive support, including respite, which contributes to a reduction in the number of children entering care. For most children, these interventions reduce risks and support to create a more protective environment around them.
12. Children living in private fostering arrangements receive robust oversight and support. Children are seen promptly and detailed assessments, statutory checks and regular reviews are undertaken.
13. The response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children has improved since the last inspection. Children receive prompt and relationship-based help, so that they can live in suitable homes. Children are offered advocacy to help them understand their rights.
14. Disabled children in need or in need of protection are supported by practitioners who are creative and communicate effectively and adapt their practice to meet children's needs. Children benefit from significant multi-agency collaboration, including planning for transition to adult social care.
15. Systems for managing allegations against professionals who work with children are effective. There is regular liaison with partner agencies and child-focused safeguarding investigations are thorough.
16. There is increasing focus on providing early help for young carers, who benefit from a wide range of activities and community support services. However, the impact for children who are subject to child in need and child protection planning, and who are also young carers, is not fully understood. These children would benefit from earlier recognition and stronger consideration of their caring responsibilities.
17. The needs of children who are missing education or electively home educated are overseen through systems that aim to keep children visible and supported.

Families who educate their children at home benefit from strong relationships with practitioners who support them, which opens up helpful routes to exam centres, health professionals and early conversations when concerns arise. A very small number of children experience delays in being allocated school places and receiving full-time education, which does not give them the protection that full-time school attendance provides. The local authority's layered approach to reducing the risk to children missing education is strengthened by timely information-sharing with partner agencies, which results in most of these children being identified quickly through persistent work and their whereabouts being confirmed, so that support can be provided.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

18. Children in care in Norfolk receive exceptional help and support that enables most to make significant progress. Decisions for children to enter care are timely and grounded in thorough assessment and only made when options are exhausted and children cannot remain safely with their families. The effective use of family group decision-making throughout the family help service means that family networks are explored early in children's journeys.
19. Children benefit from robust oversight of permanence planning, with plans that are progressed at pace. Different routes to permanence are explored well for children. This means that the majority of children move promptly into permanent, stable and nurturing homes, where they settle well. If it becomes necessary for children to move to a new home, such changes are carefully planned to help children understand their plans.
20. Children are placed with kinship carers when possible. Effective support is provided to children and families and, when appropriate, special guardianship orders are considered. Kinship carers are supported by a specialist team that responds with sensitivity, and increasing timeliness, to the needs of both carers and children. Leaders are actively developing a culture which helps professionals to build confidence to increase the number of kinship arrangements for children, including through special guardianship.
21. Children and families receive specialist and skilled support if it is possible for children to return to the care of their parents. Thorough assessments consider risks and support needs. Multi-agency input, including functional family therapy and support from the in-house emotional wellbeing service, Support for Success (SfS), helps with sensitive and proactive relationship-building. As a result, children in care who can return home safely do so, with sustained support that helps them to remain successfully with their families.
22. Children's care plans are developed closely with children, and include carefully crafted, child-friendly versions tailored to each child's age and level of understanding. These plans are updated and reviewed regularly, and clearly reflect how children understand their planning between reviews. Independent

reviewing officers (IROs) maintain a close overview of children's progress and, when necessary, challenge drift in progressing plans.

23. Children benefit from well-supported family time. Carers and social workers promote positive experiences and review arrangements regularly. Work to explore and strengthen family networks is purposeful, including through referrals to lifelong links. This intervention enables children to rebuild connections and access important identity and cultural information to support their wellbeing.
24. Children, including those who live outside Norfolk, are well supported in education. The virtual school makes a positive difference to children's educational experiences, rooted in constructive relationships with schools and carers and thoughtful use of additional support. Effective use of personal education plans (PEPs) ensures that children receive the right support at the right time. A rich programme of extended learning activities helps build children's confidence and connections outside school.
25. Children's health needs are responded to promptly, with regular checks and swift access to optician and dental services. Children and social workers actively use the dedicated wellbeing service SfS, which provides clinician support delivered at a pace in line with children's needs. Practitioners also value their input when planning life-story work and direct work with children.
26. Children, including those who are disabled, develop stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. Work with each child is thoughtfully planned to create a sense of safety and security. Visits to children are not only regular but sensitively increased when children need a closer presence. Social workers do not miss opportunities to be there when needed, for example when children's emotional wellbeing declines or when they move to a new home. A wide range of engaging and creative direct work tools, from colourful social stories to eco-maps, help children have age-appropriate conversations about things that are important to them.
27. Disabled children in care are well supported in homes that meet their needs. Their independence is promoted and transition planning to adult social care services begins early so that children and their families feel prepared and more confident about their futures.
28. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive high-quality support from dedicated social workers who are attuned to children's experiences of trauma, cultural identity and religious needs. Children live in homes that meet their needs. They are supported with education, can access in-house emotional support quickly and get help with locating family members. Interpreters are used routinely to support with hearing children's voices and helping them to understand and be part of their plans.

29. Social workers and expert practitioners recognise vulnerabilities and respond promptly to emerging risks or when children are missing from care. Return home interviews are thorough and contribute to strong assessments of risk. Multi-agency forums such as MACE and adolescent panels support a coordinated response and strategy meetings are held to discuss children's needs. When necessary, safety restrictions such as deprivation of liberty orders are used for short periods to increase care and protection.
30. The use of unregistered children's homes is extremely rare and a last resort. The very small number of children living in these homes receive high levels of support and frequent visits by trusted adults and social workers to regularly assess their safety and complex needs. Robust and thorough senior management and IRO oversight of these arrangements supports leaders to have an accurate understanding of children's circumstances. Applications for registration are progressed where appropriate, alongside purposeful work to identify long-term arrangements for children.
31. Fostering recruitment approaches have been effective and the number of foster carer households has increased. Foster carer assessments are robust. Significant changes have been made to improve fostering and adoption panel arrangements in the past 12 months. These changes were managed effectively, with minimal disruption to children and carers. Foster carers spoke positively about the training they receive and praised some areas of support offered by the service, including the use of hubs, network support groups and events for children.
32. Children with a plan for adoption are thoughtfully and carefully considered. Relationships between the regional adoption agency (Adopt East) and the local authority are effective, with communication and accountability maintained through regular forums that support partnership working. Assessment quality is consistently strong, and panels provide robust quality assurance. Adopters report feeling well supported overall, including with post-adoption support.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding

33. Care leavers in Norfolk receive meaningful and ambitious support from the life beyond care service. Care leavers are introduced to their personal advisers (PAs) early, helping them to build high-quality relationships, which positively supports their transition to adulthood. Reflective group supervision at the point of allocation helps practitioners share information effectively so that care leavers do not have to retell their stories. As a result, PAs have a comprehensive understanding of care leavers' needs before meeting them.
34. Care leavers have stable and longstanding relationships with their PAs. PAs show genuine care and commitment to help care leavers fulfil their aspirations, and their practice is highly relational. They encourage young people to work outside their comfort zones in a bid to increase their skills, resilience and confidence. PAs sustain regular contact, including during periods of crisis, and

their support is guided by what care leavers feel is a priority. This high level of care was reflected in the very positive feedback from care leavers; for example, one care leaver talked about their PA being there 'every step of the way'.

35. Care leavers benefit from creative support from PAs to help them understand their life histories. Lifelong links workers support care leavers to strengthen their relationships by reconnecting with significant individuals from their past. This work helps reduce social isolation and improves emotional wellbeing.
36. When concerns about exploitation arise, support from PAs and the team around care leavers provides reassurance and help. Care leavers' risks are reduced as a result of this prompt work, which is completed collaboratively with young people and other professionals.
37. Care leavers receive a broad range of support through the local offer that meets their needs. Care leavers have been involved in the co-production of the offer, including how this is presented online. Leaders are working with children in care and care leavers who are part of their Children in Care Council to further increase its accessibility. PAs are proactive in making care leavers aware of their rights and entitlements. Similarly, care leavers know how to make a complaint if they are unhappy with services.
38. Care leavers receive well-established practical support to develop life skills such as budgeting, tenancy readiness and general independence, as well as having access to accredited learning qualifications. They receive continued encouragement and help from their PAs, reflected in the ongoing support to attend appointments and complete forms, giving guidance and general support. Many care leavers attend regular, accessible drop-in sessions, which are held in 3 areas of the county. Here, they receive support in relation to various aspects of their lives and have fun with their peers, which reduces isolation. At all levels of the organisation, as corporate parents, the ambition to provide consistent support for care leavers is impressively realised, helping many achieve their potential.
39. Comprehensive individualised pathway plans are co-written sensitively with care leavers. PAs are adept at reflecting care leavers' needs, personalities and wishes, including those of young people who are not able to communicate verbally. Plans use humour and personal references that resonate specifically with care leavers, capturing their interests, ambitions, views or concerns well. Contingency planning also includes various options for support.
40. Care leavers receive ongoing targeted support beyond the age of 21, with continuity of workers. If care leavers make clear they no longer want to receive support, a co-created 'leaving well pathway' explains the open-door policy to care leavers, to make use of if they change their mind.

41. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children continue to receive trauma-informed support, guidance and education, alongside a wide range of services to support their community integration and meet their cultural needs.
42. Exceptional support is provided to care leavers who are parents, including targeted participation groups dedicated to young parents, helping them to strengthen their relationships and build their confidence as parents. Joint work between family help practitioners and PAs ensures coordinated support and planning for both parent and child, when that is required.
43. Care leavers in custody continue to receive the support they need from PAs, including visits while in custody, with planning on release and reintegration into the community.
44. Care leavers' health needs are consistently identified and reviewed. Emotional and mental health needs are met extremely well through the in-house service, other statutory services or charitable organisations. For care leavers who have complex mental health needs and/or substance misuse issues, including self-harm and psychiatric admissions, PAs provide strong advocacy, navigating adult social care and coordinating multi-agency planning to reduce the impact of having to wait for external support to become available.
45. Care leavers receive warm, practical and ambitious support that helps many make steady progress towards accessing education, employment or training. When care leavers need help, staff take on tasks that may overwhelm many young adults, such as arranging bursary applications, supporting accommodation moves or helping with complex paperwork. Multi-agency partners work together effectively to offer a broad range of programmes, work experience and guidance that help young people take their next steps.
46. The majority of young people live in suitable and secure homes that meet their needs and help them fulfil their potential in adulthood. PAs work closely with housing colleagues and undertake joint visits to ensure that housing needs are met.
47. Care leavers' views are highly valued by senior leaders, and their involvement in workshops and the corporate parenting board helps shape changes. These improvements are planned with and guided by young people.

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

48. Children in Norfolk benefit from a highly effective and wide range of services, led by a stable and highly aspirational senior leadership team. The director of children's services (DCS), alongside her senior leadership team, models a consistently tenacious, ambitious vision for children and care leavers. Leaders' impressive resilience and determination to improve set a positive tone across the whole system. Senior leaders know their services well and present accurate

self-evaluation that clearly identifies strengths and areas for further development. This reflective approach reinforces a culture in which practice evolves in response to learning and feedback.

49. Corporate and political leaders maintain a firm and sustained focus on children's services. Effective oversight has ensured that resources have remained aligned with priorities and children's lives continue to be enriched by new and evolving services. This commitment to allocate resources is evident in Norfolk's children's services' ability to progress significant transformation programmes effectively while maintaining or improving quality of practice.
50. The implementation of the family help model in September 2024 is well embedded and delivers a coherent, wraparound offer for children and families. This multidisciplinary work and investment make a meaningful difference to children and families.
51. Leaders have a clear and purposeful approach to developing sufficiency of homes for children in care and care leavers. A range of interventions have been developed to successfully enhance the offer and respond to demand. This includes recent investment leading to an increase of in-house fostering, residential and supported accommodation provision. This has made a considerable difference to the availability and choice of homes for children and care leavers. Leaders in the regional Foster East partnership continue their strategic conversations about homes for children to further develop their approach.
52. Partnership arrangements are mature and well established. The DCS is influential in bringing partners together to continue to strengthen and refine the already collaborative approach to safeguarding children in Norfolk. Partner agencies use opportunities through the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to establish priorities, undertake audits and share learning.
53. Corporate parenting responsibilities are a priority for all. Children and care leavers speak with pride about the impact of their contributions. The Norfolk Children in Care Council (NiCC) is influential, and leaders respond constructively to its calls for action. As a result, several practice areas have been strengthened, including input into the development of training and the 'ideal worker' principles that detail what children believe constitutes relationship-based practice. Children and care leavers have access to advocacy and independent visitors, ensuring their voices are heard.
54. Performance monitoring is rigorous, within a quality assurance framework that provides leaders with the information needed to consolidate practice. A broad range of audit activity and peer reviews is undertaken that collectively supports a thorough understanding of practice across the system.
55. Management oversight and supervision are significant strengths. Regular group supervision, alongside individual supervision, supports practitioners to plan and

deliver effective help. This approach promotes shared accountability, collective risk management and encourages collaborative reflection so that children's needs are holistically considered and met.

56. Leaders remain focused on maintaining what is already a stable, knowledgeable and skilled workforce with minimal use of agency staff. Continued investment in Norfolk's Institute of Practice Excellence, which provides dedicated support to newly qualified social workers, a social work apprenticeship scheme, international recruitment and the creation of specialist roles such as court and child protection experts, provides alternative career pathways which support retention and progression. Practitioners report manageable caseloads, enabling them to devote time and care to working impactfully with children and care leavers. Learning and development opportunities are extensive, including a well-established practice week that focuses on learning directly from children and care leavers. A range of employee networks provide safe spaces for staff to connect.
57. Commitment to tackle racism and challenge disproportionality for children and families involved with statutory services is evident in practice. An anti-racism action plan to support staff, children and families has led to the appointment of a lead practitioner to coordinate this work. The workforce's willingness to learn and embrace cultural humility evidences this commitment.
58. Leaders, managers and practitioners are outward looking, open to learning and share their own learning. Most importantly, they focus on what matters to children, creating opportunities, increasing safety and helping children to make new memories. Inspectors heard many examples of these in practice, with one event organised by the council described by a child as 'one of the best memories I've ever had'.

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