

21 March 2025

Claire Shiels
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Dear Ms Shiels

Focused visit to North Somerset local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to North Somerset local authority children's services on 19 and 20 February 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Bailey and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children with a child-in-need or child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

This was the first focused visit since the full inspection of children's services in March 2023, which found that the progress and experiences of children in need of help or protection required improvement to be good.

Since then, a new leadership team has been appointed who have enhanced, and largely embedded, the social work practice model and improved frontline management across the family support and safeguarding teams. There have been notable improvements for many children with child-in-need or child protection plans, with many receiving holistic and timely help, although some variability remains. Responses to disabled children have weakened, leading to drift and delays in their plans. Leaders had recognised this and are taking appropriate action to improve practice. They are in the process of strengthening their quality assurance framework, with developments already supporting better insight into practice. Engagement with the workforce has improved and morale is strong. Inspectors did not identify any children at immediate risk during the visit.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Workforce stability, management oversight and timeliness and quality of planning and reviews for disabled children.

- Consistent application of practice standards when children step down from child protection planning.

Main findings

Most children receive support and protection in line with their level of need and risk, with thresholds applied appropriately. When children's needs change, most decisions to step up or step down between child protection planning and child-in-need support are generally clear and justified. For most children, the length of their plan aligns to their needs. However, some services designed to help parents suffering domestic abuse or misusing alcohol have long wait times. Additionally, some children's plans do not step down to the intensive family support service at the right time, due to capacity issues. As a result, some children remain subject to statutory social work intervention for longer than they need.

Positively, when the intensive family support service begins its work at the end of a period of statutory planning, it includes a sensitive approach to transitions into the team. Joint visits with social workers and planning informed by the latest child-in-need review ensure support is focused on meeting families' current needs, rather than rescrutinising their history.

Social workers act promptly when children's needs change or risks increase during an ongoing period of support. Strategy discussions are well attended and collate information from key partners. This leads to decisions which are based on a thorough understanding of family history and cumulative patterns of harm. Social workers make frequent visits during child protection investigations, ensuring that children are seen promptly and alone. Safety plans are clear, actionable and family-led. Child protection investigations are timely, with social workers responding dynamically to secure children's safety as new information is gathered through the process.

Children's plans are generally well constructed, clear, written in plain language and include contingencies. They specify what parents need to do to meet their children's needs and the aims of the support provided by professionals, and include specific and measurable goals, all of which ensures reviews are impact focused. Most plans are reviewed regularly at meetings with the right people involved. Social workers are resourceful in supporting families to participate in these meetings. Consequently, plans include tailored and targeted help.

Timeliness of core group meetings for child protection plans has improved and they are becoming more effective. However, decisions to end child protection plans have sometimes been made by child protection chairs through email communication between the core group members. Senior leaders were unaware of this until this visit but confirmed that this practice does not align with their expectations. They acted immediately to review children's records and take remedial action.

When social workers are consistent, children and families benefit from trusting relationships, underpinned by purposeful visits. Social workers regularly see children in a variety of settings and undertake meaningful direct work to ascertain their wishes and feelings, which directly informs their plans. Children over eight with a child protection plan are routinely offered an advocate. Observations about the care of babies and young children are well recorded and joint visits with the health visiting service are used effectively with young and vulnerable children.

Family networks are engaged early, with social workers carefully planning and facilitating family network meetings. Less experienced workers receive support to develop this skill. Social workers demonstrate care and pride when discussing their children, and their skilful application of the chosen practice model encourages engagement from families, including those who are initially anxious or resistant. Many social workers apply relational and restorative practices, with curiosity, challenge and clarity.

Responses to neglect are variable. Social workers regularly use assessment tools to track concerns and progress, so many families receive appropriate help. Some families, however, have unrealistic expectations set for them about the progress they can make without intensive practical support. While social workers organise local charity support to help ameliorate some of these needs, some children's situations do not improve quickly enough. For most children, progress is tracked well but, for a few, there is too much focus on short-term changes without clear long-term planning to ensure parents can meet their future needs.

When children's circumstances do not improve, decisions to escalate into pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline are made at the right time. This, coupled with clear pre-proceedings letters, ensures that parents understand what needs to change. Appropriate assessments are identified early and commence without delay, including those for wider family members who may potentially wish to care for children in the future. Consequently, court proceedings are front loaded with the right information to support timely decision-making for children.

The strengthening family connections team supports children to remain living safely at home. Workers are flexible, creative and well integrated with other parts of children's services, providing well-coordinated and holistic help.

High staff turnover, frequent changes in social workers and gaps in management oversight affect the quality of support for disabled children with a child-in-need or child protection plan. Some families face delays in receiving necessary support, and the quality of children's records makes it hard to determine if plans are current and relevant. Leaders are aware of this and have increased management capacity in the team. In addition, newly appointed social workers are working to build relationships with families and update plans, but in a context of outdated or hard-to-find records and weak coordination between partners.

Most social workers in the family support and safeguarding teams now receive frequent supervision and management oversight. Social workers told inspectors the supervision they receive is a valuable opportunity to reflect on their practice with children and their families, manage workloads and develop professionally. The recording of social work supervision varies in quality, with some examples lacking evidence of reflection and analysis.

The chief executive, lead member, director and assistant director share an accurate self-evaluation of services in North Somerset. As a result, they have secured support from the LGA and an improvement partner to review services for disabled children and their quality assurance framework. While it is too early to assess the impact of the recently implemented improvement board for disabled children, changes to the quality assurance framework are enhancing oversight. Leaders have developed revised key performance indicators, resulting in more timely, responsive practice, and introduced a new audit tool that better assesses practice impact, improving the quality of audit recommendations. Leaders plan to continue their work with their improvement partner as they implement further developments to the quality assurance framework, particularly in relation to breadth and depth of collaborative audit activity.

Leaders model the current practice models through their own behaviour. They have made significant progress in recruiting and retaining a permanent workforce across most teams supporting children with a child-in-need or child protection plan. Visible and accessible leaders and managers are providing the workforce with additional confidence, particularly in the face of growing demand and complexity in this part of the service. Social workers value the opportunities provided to them for learning, development and progression, and members of the workforce, including agency staff who choose to take on permanent roles with North Somerset, described a supportive culture, where successful work with children and families is recognised and celebrated.

Leaders communicate change effectively and all the members of the workforce who met with inspectors are actively engaged in the journey of improvement.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Steve Bailey
His Majesty's Inspector