

14 February 2025

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Dear Ms Lincoln

Focused visit to Essex County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Essex County Council children's services on 15 and 16 January 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke, Rebecca Dubbins and Parveen Hussain.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions.

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

Headline findings

Essex continues to provide high-quality services to help children and their families in need of support and to safeguard children who are at risk of harm or who have suffered harm. The Essex strength-based relationship approach for working with families is supported throughout by consistently good social work practice. Inspirational and dynamic leadership, clear structures and process enable practitioners to work effectively within this framework with children and their families. Practitioners spend time building trusting relationships with children, parents and their wider family networks. This is evident in the work with children within the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline (PLO). The work with these families has supported many parents to make the necessary changes required to achieve their best for their children and for them to safely remain within their families' networks.

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

- The review and realignment of support to children when parents' progress is slow or disrupted and children are on child protection or pre-proceeding plans for a long or repeated periods of time.

Main findings

Identifying and responding to children's needs and appropriate thresholds

For the most vulnerable children in Essex, when their care and safety circumstances do not improve or are not sustained through delivery of child in need or child protection plans, timely legal planning meetings are held. These meetings involve senior managers and legal services to consider working with families within the pre-proceedings element of the PLO. If the outcome is that this threshold is met and a decision made to progress into PLO pre-proceedings, meetings with each parent are convened within reasonable timescales. Social workers are suitably persistent and timely in their efforts to help parents to engage with this process.

Letters to commence pre-proceedings make it clear to parents the changes required to avoid their children being made subject to care proceedings. Letters are well written in language that is easy for families to understand. Advice and guidance are included in these letters and parents are assisted to access independent legal support. Pre-proceeding letters list the concerns while also seeking to identify strengths. The stronger letters very clearly outline how the parents' behaviour impacts on their children. Social workers make time and sensitively go through these letters with parents, considering any learning needs the parent may have to ensure they understand the concerns, the gravity of the situation and the consequence of not making the necessary changes.

Social workers build and develop positive relationships with children and their families through regular and purposeful visits. Direct work with children seeking their views on their welfare is an integral part of the work with children. This work is skilfully done and is well embedded in social work practice. Children's trusting relationships with people in their schools also help practitioners to understand children's perspectives on their home life and experiences.

The quality of social work support and intervention for children in Essex is of a high standard. The ongoing process of assessments for the most vulnerable children ensures that their needs are well understood by their social workers and reflected in routinely updated assessments, informed by meaningful genograms and updated chronologies. These assessments inform plans designed to offer tailored intervention and support to help parents to meet their children's needs.

Social workers work well with other agencies, seeking their expertise when required to provide wraparound support to children and their parents to help them to succeed. Core group meetings pull together the progression of the child protection and PLO pre-proceedings plans, share information and update on progress to inform

the planning process. These meetings are held regularly and are attended by most of the relevant professionals and family members.

Key professionals within children's services work productively together, but some plans for families are delayed by the limited engagement and the prioritisation of some adult services. Long waiting times for adult mental health services, probation sexual offender programmes and housing services impact on the progression of some plans. Leaders recognise that much of the work with parents in PLO pre-proceedings is focused on assisting parents to make changes, so the engagement of these services is essential. Essex leaders have circumvented some of these challenges through their investment in multidisciplinary teams (MDT) in the north and south of the county with plans to further expand across the county. These teams have been externally assessed as being able to successfully bring together practitioners from a range of backgrounds, including substance misuse, mental health, housing, youth work and education to provide effective support to families. Practitioners from these MDT teams have successfully collaborated with families and have helped to change behaviours that have prevented parents from providing safe care for their children. Leaders acknowledge that MDTs will not fix the wider issues, but while strategic actions on a local and national scale are being discussed and undertaken to tackle these challenges, MDTs are successfully helping the service in managing the work to support these most vulnerable children.

Families' support networks are routinely explored by practitioners to enable children to be supported by people who know them well. The Essex model of family group conference is well established in Essex. Experienced practitioners facilitate these discussions and commence this process by first seeking children's views. They then expertly work with key family network members, often managing challenging relationships to help families to produce a plan which provides support, stability and safety for the child. These meetings have been used successfully with families within PLO pre-proceedings and have been a redeeming factor with family members stepping in for parents where change has been slow or challenging.

Viability and special guardian/connected carer assessments are initiated early during the PLO pre-proceedings process. They are completed in good time, well before final decisions are made for children, and are accompanied by support plans which are kept under review. The local authority has invested in the support to family carers, with special guardians/connected carers remaining eligible for support until children reach the age of 18 years and beyond, if required. When carer assessments are positive and parents' circumstances decline, children are well supported to reside within their wider family networks, avoiding last-minute planning and uncertainty for them.

The length of time families remain in PLO pre-proceedings in Essex is steadily decreasing. In many circumstances, children and their families benefit from the help they have been provided. Over the past year, 49% of families in Essex have been successfully stepped down from PLO at the pre-proceedings stage, demonstrating the effectiveness of interventions.

A small number of families remain on a child protection plan and within PLO pre-proceedings for long or repeat periods of time. For some of these families, this is a positive decision and allows parents the necessary time and support to make meaningful progress before completing fuller parenting assessments. However, for a small number of children, particularly where neglect is enduring or for babies and repeat pregnancies, it is not always evident or clearly outlined in records that children's experiences and resilience are continually considered or appraised in the context of their parents' slow progress. The strong commitment in Essex to keeping children within their families is evident in social work practice. While this family-centred approach is a key strength, maintaining clear and consistent expectations with explicit timescales is essential to ensure that children receive consistently good enough care. Notwithstanding, inspectors found occasions when expectations were modified when they needed to be fixed, and plans that were not always explicit with clear timescales for targets to be achieved. While recognising the fine balance between parental progress and children's well-being, it was not always evident that decision-making prioritised the cumulative impact on children to ensure they continued to receive good enough care without it culminating in a crisis event. For some of these children, escalation out of PLO pre-proceedings into the courts arena was often only taken as the response to a crisis event of significant harm.

The impact for children of work undertaken within the PLO pre-proceedings is kept under regular review in both social work and team managers' supervision and in Quadrant PLO tracker meetings chaired by senior managers. Work with families is routinely tracked and monitored. While oversight for many children is evident, for children whose needs are neglected over a long period, the mandatory supervision time frame is often too long and may miss exploring and focusing on the impact of the child while various attempts are made to engage parents.

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service speaks positively about the quality of the PLO pre-proceedings work in Essex. Key social work tasks and activities, assessments and support arrangements are completed in good time. Notwithstanding this, timescales for progressing through the courts are often lengthy due to court capacity and decision-making processes and this has resulted in delay for some children securing timely permanence. Essex has been working with its partners on the Local Family Justice Board to address these issues.

Oversight of practice in Essex is mature, well developed and clearly integrated in business processes to ensure leaders and practitioners are fully aware of the quality of their practice. Learning is recognised and needs addressed. Social workers spoke positively about their involvement in audits, describing this as a reflective space. Practice reviews and case audits demonstrate a consistently strong social work response, with most audits accurately evaluating practice quality as 'good' or better.

All workers spoken to said that they enjoy working in Essex. Workloads are described as manageable, and they spoke positively about the culture of learning and being able to access quality training. Supervision was valued for taking place regularly, providing time to ask questions and to be reflective. Workers were confident about

the opportunities for them to advance their careers and prosper in Essex, with many already having progressed to senior roles in the organisation. All workers spoke highly of their managers and reported senior leaders to be visible, available and supportive.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
His Majesty's Inspector