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6 November 20205

Claire Shiels
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Dear Ms Shiels

Focused visit to North Somerset children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to North Somerset children's services on 7 and 8 October 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Bailey and Zafer Yilkan.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2023, political and corporate leaders have taken steps to improve the quality of support and services provided to children in care. Their actions and oversight demonstrate their ambition and determination to strengthen children's services and drive meaningful change to improve children's lives. Most children in care in North Somerset live in stable, nurturing homes and benefit from committed social workers and carers. Their individual voices are increasingly shaping the services they receive, however mechanisms to hear them collectively as a council-wide corporate parent are not fully developed. Social workers show genuine commitment and attuned practice, with some specific areas requiring further strengthening.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?¹

- Responses to children in care who go missing, including the timeliness and quality of return home interviews and tracking of resulting actions to help reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence. (Outcome 3, national framework)

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.

- Transitions to adulthood, specifically the timeliness of coordination of support for disabled children. (Outcome 4, national framework)
- Children's collective influence and participation, specifically through the corporate parenting panel. (Outcome 1, national framework)

Main findings

Decisions for children to enter care are informed by detailed assessments of need and risk, leading to timely action when children cannot remain safely at home. Most social workers provide highly child-centred support to children when they move. They help children to understand what is happening, involving them in planning and showing great care and attention to help them settle into their new home. Children's care plans are formulated quickly and then kept under regular review throughout their time in care by independent safeguarding and reviewing officers who get to know them well, ensuring that their oversight supports coordinated and responsive help. Early and purposeful engagement with family networks promotes children's safety and stability, ensuring that, whenever possible, children have well-planned moves to safe and familiar carers.

Planning for adulthood is increasingly thoughtful for most children in care and starts at the right stage for them. Pathway planning begins early, with social workers, personal advisers and children co-producing plans that set out the support they will receive as they move towards independence. However, some children's expressed wishes are not fully reflected in their plans, reducing their sense of ownership at this important stage.

Social workers know their children well and demonstrate commitment and sensitivity in their relationships with them. They visit regularly, often seeing children alone, and focus on progressing children's plans and strengthening relationships with them. When the plan is for children to return home, social workers work meaningfully with parents to enable safe reunification. When this is not possible, social workers show tenacity and empathy in helping children maintain safe and meaningful connections with people who are important to them, contributing to their sense of belonging and identity.

Children's individual views are taken seriously and acted on. As a result, they receive care that tangibly reflects their individual needs and circumstances. Child-focused and emotionally attuned direct work with children is now more evident in practice, representing a clear improvement since the last inspection.

Social workers respond promptly and appropriately to immediate risks to children, including when they go missing. While these actions ensure children's immediate safety, follow-up work is less consistent. Return home interviews do not take place swiftly enough or explore in sufficient depth the reasons why children go missing. Broader work to address underlying or longer-term risks for other children is not

sufficiently prompt or sustained. As a result, plans do not help anticipate or prevent repeat incidents, limiting how well they strengthen children's safety over time.

Children benefit from carers, social workers and the virtual school working together closely to provide continual encouragement and care. Health needs are well understood and met through regular assessments and reviews. Children are supported to enjoy hobbies and activities that help them develop confidence, identity and self-esteem. Strengthened relational support from professionals in the virtual school helps promote children's educational attendance and achievement.

Disabled children in care benefit from social workers who understand their communication, health and educational needs. Where relationships are sustained, children experience trust and continuity. However, frequent changes of social worker mean some children do not benefit from this consistency. Planning for transition to adulthood usually starts in good time, but children's needs are not considered by the transition panel until much later, reducing the impact of timely multi-agency planning.

Leaders have taken steps to significantly reduce the number of children living in unregistered children's homes. These arrangements are now only used in exceptional circumstances. Decision-making and oversight by senior leaders are robust and careful consideration of children's needs and supported transitions help children to move to suitable and registered accommodation at the earliest opportunity.

Children's voices are increasingly central to both individual planning and wider service development. Social workers are proactive in helping children to express their views and exercise their rights, although arrangements to ensure children know about and are able to access advocacy and independent visiting services are not fully embedded. Leaders have strengthened participation capacity and are responding promptly to feedback from an annual survey, using it to shape tangible service improvements. Children's perspectives are now more visible in quality assurance activity, and there are emerging examples of thoughtful work being undertaken with children following unplanned placement moves. While there is a growing culture across children's services of shared learning from children's experiences, their valuable contributions to the corporate parenting board are not sufficiently recorded or translated into clear actions. This limits the clarity, accountability and ability of leaders to feed back to children in care how their views have been listened to and acted on.

Management oversight and social work supervision are regular, with more recent examples better exploring children's lived experiences and targeting the progression of their plans. Social work practice is further supported by a quality assurance framework that is maturing, and delivering more opportunities for reflection, practice learning and accountability for improvement. The impact of audit activity is more limited for some children in care who have experienced changes of social worker, as

this has inhibited the progress of their plan and actions intended to improve their care journeys.

Work to increase the number and strengthen the provision of local, stable and loving homes for children in care is purposeful and well-paced. Foster carer recruitment is rising and, as a result, children benefit from safer, better-supported care. Children who met with inspectors said they feel safe where they live, with some describing a strong sense of belonging and connection to their carers.

Political and corporate leaders are tireless in their commitment to improve the experiences and progress of children in care. They are ambitious for children, which is reflected in tangible investment and activity, including increased capacity in key areas which include participation, management oversight and workforce development through their social work academy.

Leaders are determined to bring about lasting change for children. They are not complacent and continue to use external scrutiny, improvement partners and peer reviews to challenge and shape their progress. They have produced an accurate self-assessment, providing a sound basis for continued improvement.

Social workers feel valued and well supported to develop and to progress their careers ambitions in North Somerset. Newly qualified social workers talked positively of the support they receive, and agency workers continue to choose to take up permanent roles in North Somerset, contributing to more children in care experiencing consistent, meaningful relational practice that helps them thrive.

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