

Inspection of looked after children services

Norfolk County Council

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Reporting inspector: Gary Lamb HMI

Age group: All

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About this inspection

1. The purpose of the inspection is to evaluate the contribution made by relevant services to the quality of service provision for looked after children and care leavers. The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). The inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.
2. The evidence evaluated by inspectors included:
 - discussions with children and young people receiving services, front line staff and managers, senior officers including the Assistant Director of Children's Services and the Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, elected members and a range of community representatives
 - analysing and evaluating reports from a variety of sources including a review of the Children's Services Service Plan, performance data, information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day care provision
 - a review of 32 case files for children and young people with a range of need. This provided a view of services provided over time and the quality of reporting, recording and decision making undertaken

The inspection judgements and what they mean

3. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding (Grade 1)	A service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good (Grade 2)	A service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate (Grade 3)	A service that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate (Grade 4)	A service that does not meet minimum requirements

Service information

4. Norfolk is geographically the fifth largest county in England. Norfolk has about 176,300 children and young people under the age of 19 years (mid-2012 estimates), which is 20.4% of the population. The proportion of children entitled to free school meals is below the national average. Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 5.5% of the school age population where the largest minority ethnic group is 'any other mixed background'. The proportion of pupils with English as an additional language is significantly below the national figure.
5. Norfolk is a relatively prosperous county. However, there are places within the county where deprivation levels exceed the national average, particularly in parts of Great Yarmouth, Norwich and King's Lynn – but also in smaller pockets in the rural areas (English Indices of Deprivation 2010). Many of the more deprived areas in Norfolk are characterised by high levels of income deprivation affecting children. Around one in six children live in income deprived families, ranging from almost one in three in Norwich to one in ten in Broadland.
6. Norfolk's Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) receives and responds to all contacts and referrals to children's social care, including children missing from care. Professionals from key partner agencies (children's services, health, police, adult social care and probation) are co-located and work together in this service.
7. At the time of the inspection there were 1,088 looked after children. They comprise 230 children less than five years of age, 721 children of school age and 137 young people aged over 16. There were 378 young people over the age of 18 receiving support as care leavers. Social care services for children have 636 local authority foster carers and nine local authority children's homes, which includes two children with disabilities residential units offering respite care. Community based children's services are provided by three duty teams, six safeguarding teams, six corporate parenting teams, seven children in need teams, three children with disabilities teams, three fostering support teams, three Norfolk family focus teams, three early years' teams and three school support teams. These teams are supported by the county-wide diverse community team and the Norfolk adoption service.

Overall effectiveness of services for looked after children and young people

Grade 4 (inadequate)

8. The local authority is not carrying out its statutory responsibilities for looked after children and care leavers in key areas of service operation. The local authority's ambition for looked after children and care leavers has been set too low. The strategic leadership of the local authority has failed to accurately forecast the level of need for early help for children on the edge of care resulting in a high and rising level of demand for the looked after children service. Demand for service has consistently exceeded the council's budget allocation and the high demand has stretched the service.
9. All children do not have a care plan or pathway plan to shape the service they receive and too many looked after children's statutory reviews are not undertaken in a timely manner. Some looked after children are not visited routinely by a social worker so it is difficult for them to develop meaningful relationships so that they can express their feelings, views and aspirations. Performance on looked after children and care leavers outcomes judged good at the last inspection in 2011 has not been sustained and action to improve outcomes judged inadequate at that time have not improved sufficiently.
10. The local authority has ensured that a large proportion of children are placed in stable placements with families. Where residential placements are used, almost all children are in good or better service provision with strong commissioning arrangements providing good quality for money. Effective action has been undertaken to reduce costly out of county placements. This has led to a reduction in the unit cost of placements. Programmes to respond to children with complex needs and those who are the most vulnerable have also been effectively implemented. However, too many children with an adoption plan have been waiting too long for a suitable placement.

Capacity to improve

Grade 4 (inadequate)

11. The local authority does not have a track record of improving services and outcomes for looked after children. Insufficient priority has been given to early help, edge of care services which is contributing to the high and rising looked after children population. The early help offer is as yet

unclear. The inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services in 2011 judged overall effectiveness of services for looked after children to be adequate and this inspection found little evidence of sustained improvement since this inspection with some services and outcomes having deteriorated. Although the local authority implemented an action plan following this inspection, which has led to some improvements, it has not effectively addressed inadequate health outcomes for looked after children and poor outcomes being achieved for care leavers.

12. There are some examples of good early progress being made on the implementation of some new services and programmes such as the MASH. There are also examples of good quality social work making a discernible difference to improve the lives of children and young people, however, practice is not consistent across the county. Too many of the comments made by looked after children and care leavers describe poor quality care and support, particularly when social workers do not have the time they need to carry out the social work task. The looked after children service operation has not been given sufficient priority in the organisational management structure. The capacity of the workforce remains underdeveloped and there are insufficient numbers of social workers and IROs to meet the statutory responsibilities of the local authority.
13. There is insufficient understanding of the principles of corporate parenting within the broad group of councillors. Scrutiny of the delivery of the service provided by elected members is not fully developed. It does not provide robust challenge to ensure that the capacity of the looked after children and care leaver service provision and performance on outcomes is sufficient. The integrated children's system (ICS) for case recording does not provide a full range of reports to inform management decisions. This means that managers and elected members do not know when the statutory responsibilities of the local authority are not being met.
14. The local authority and partners are beginning to set out their vision and ambitions for the looked after children and care leaver service based on a children's service social care improvement plan. Although this is aspirational, it provides a sound basis for improvement and is backed by the required resources. Elected members, senior managers, officers in children's social care and others across the partnership who spoke with inspectors demonstrate they are determined to make improvements but this work is at a very early stage.

Areas for improvement

15. In order to improve the quality of provision and services for looked after children and young people in Norfolk, the local authority should take the following action.

Immediately:

- ensure all elected members understand their corporate parenting duties and responsibilities for looked after children and that they receive regular reports which benchmark whether the local authority is meeting its statutory responsibilities for looked after children so that elected members know and understand the service gap and provide effective scrutiny
- ensure all children and young people have a care plan which sets out their individual needs, how they will be met including any timescales for action and which is informed by their views, their social worker and, where appropriate, their parent/carer
- consolidate the improvements made so far to ensure all looked after children and care leavers have a timely, completed health assessment which is specific to their individual health requirements and their needs are met
- ensure all young people and care leavers have pathway plans which are of good quality and meet the requirements of national guidance
- review and implement care plans and specifically address the need for permanency for the high number of children with an adoption plan who have been waiting for a placement longer than six months
- ensure all social workers receive regular, recorded supervision which includes the identification number of the cases discussed, the detail of any agreed actions and timescales and that these are robustly monitored and recorded.

Within three months:

- ensure all children have a good quality personal education plan (PEP) which addresses the specific educational needs of children and young people and how they will be met including setting ambitious, but realistic targets for attendance and milestones for attainment backed by the necessary support, and that this work is supported by effective performance monitoring and reporting to drive improvement
- ensure that care plans and reviews always consider whether children can benefit from having an independent visitor so children and young people who do not have adequate contact time with a parent or carer have their needs met
- ensure that social workers always provide a written report to support the statutory review process, that this is based on the social workers' in-depth knowledge and understanding of the needs of the child or

young person, is shared and discussed with the child prior to the review and includes their wishes, feelings and aspirations

- ensure all children and young people get a copy of their assessments, plans and reviews within a reasonable time and that these arrangements extend to their parents/carers where appropriate.

Within six months:

- agree and implement an effective early help strategy that includes clearly defined edge of care service provision which is closely matched to local needs and provides equitable access to services across the county
- ensure there is a sufficient number of social workers to meet the needs of looked after children so that they have time for the social work task as set out in national guidance
- ensure there is sufficient independent reviewing officer (IRO) capacity to promote good contact with children and young people before, during and after their statutory reviews, to provide timely review reports and to track the progress of plans and review decisions
- build on the successful action taken already to reduce the number of children placed out of county in residential provision and continue to build the capacity of local family placement provision so more children are placed with families in the county
- accelerate and robustly implement existing plans to address the needs of young people and care leavers who are not in employment education and training and explore new options within the council to provide specific training and employment opportunities for looked after children
- seek opportunities for all looked after children, young people and care leavers, including those placed out of county, to contribute their views, wishes and feelings about the service they receive to determine the work of the Children in Care Council (CICC) so that the work of the CICC is targeted on the issues that are important to children in the care of the local authority and ensure that this work and progress made is reported and disseminated widely
- ensure children and young people know and understand the complaints and representation procedure, how to access independent advocacy and use the learning from these processes to inform service improvement.

Outcomes for looked after children and young people

Grade 4 (inadequate)

16. Overall outcomes for looked after children are inadequate. Whilst adequate outcomes are being achieved in some areas, the key failings in areas such as health assessments and planning, social work visits, support to prevent children needing to become looked after, care and pathway planning and outcomes for care leavers mean that the life chances of looked after children are not being effectively promoted by services in Norfolk.
17. Health outcomes for looked after children and care leavers are inadequate. The council has taken action to improve health outputs since the previous safeguarding and looked after children services inspection. This has resulted in significant recent improvement, albeit from a low base on key areas of performance, however, performance in some of these areas remains below comparators. For example, too many looked after children do not have a comprehensive health assessment and 40% of children do not have their assessment completed within timescale.
18. The main reason for delay in health assessments relates to incomplete and inaccurate applications for assessments from children's social care. A dedicated business support team now ensures that the correct data is entered onto the ICS. A dedicated secure email address system has also been introduced; the 'trust tunnel' to ensure information is shared confidentially between children's social care and health professionals. Applications for health assessments are now being closely monitored and tracked by the business support team, leading to improvement. Although systems have recently been put in place to try to ensure that the 193 looked after children placed out of the county receive health care that addresses all their physical and emotional needs, it is too early to be confident that this is yet the case.
19. The quality of health assessments is too variable. Provision has been improved to ensure all initial health assessments are undertaken by a paediatrician or practitioner with a paediatric background. Inspectors saw some good health plans, particularly for children with complex needs and those subject to court proceedings. However, assessments do not always include the early health history of children and young people contained in their initial assessment.
20. There are good arrangements in place to ensure carers can get the help and advice they need from an appropriate health professional through the provision of a dedicated contact phone number. This includes health advice on issues such as sexual and mental health which is well used by

carers and this is actively helping to support placement stability. Looked after children have good access to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS) to get the support they need and the CAMHS also provide a consultancy service to foster carers and children's homes where this is requested.

21. The arrangements for ensuring looked after children and care leavers are safe are adequate. Although children are in safe placements, of which nearly all are of good quality, insufficient priority has been given to children on the edge of care which has contributed to the high and still rising looked after children population. There are some examples of good interventions to support a few families on the edge of care. However, the early help strategy has not yet been agreed and the early help offer across the county is as yet unclear although plans are well advanced.
22. Once children and young people enter the looked after care system, their particular circumstances are reviewed and agreed by a Placement Panel. This ensures that looked after children's individual assessed needs and their placement are closely matched. The inspection found no evidence of children entering the care system unnecessarily. However, there are examples of young people who have been left too long without a service, meaning that opportunities to prevent the need for care are missed and children and young people's needs are more complex and acute when they do enter care.
23. Good arrangements are in place to monitor the quality of looked after children placements. Nearly all of the local authority's own residential provision is judged either good or outstanding and no home is judged inadequate. The local authority's policy is that children and young people are only placed in good or better provision which sets a good standard for service expectations for children. The priority given by senior managers and staff to extend the independent fostering service provision locally has resulted in improved access to good quality placements for many looked after children placed with families and most looked after children experience good placement stability. However some children are not visited and seen often enough and in some cases statutory visits are not being undertaken by qualified social workers which contravenes national guidance.
24. A well-established MASH maintains a good overview of all those children and young people who go missing from home and from care, including children in care placed in Norfolk by other local authorities. Good multi-agency partnership work ensures that the individual circumstances of all children who are missing, or have been missing, are reviewed on a daily basis in an effective multi-agency meeting held at the MASH. Workers in the MASH ensure information is exchanged with key colleagues such as the allocated social worker and local police. Although the police undertake 'safe and well' visits to looked after children who have been reported

missing on their return, these arrangements are not sensitive to every child's needs or necessarily promote children raising safeguarding concerns. There are firm plans commencing in September 2013 for an independent voluntary sector service to conduct return to home visits and other work beyond that to engage young people where there is an identified need.

25. Good progress is being made on the Government action plan to tackle child sexual exploitation (CSE). Senior managers in residential units have been involved in the development of the CSE strategy and residential staff have access to relevant documentation, including the warning signs and vulnerabilities check list. Foster carers have been issued with practice guidelines to ensure they know and understand what action they must take if a child goes missing.
26. Sharply focused work with children, parents and proposed adoptive parents is taking place to avoid delay in court proceedings. A recent Ofsted thematic inspection highlighted that adoption plans are being effectively progressed by the Norfolk Family Justice Council supported by constructive relationships between the local authority, courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). These arrangements have resulted in a reduction in pre-proceedings of the Public Law Outline. Ofsted recognised that the expertise of social workers in the cases seen reduced the need for experts to provide reports which enable cases to be expedited more quickly.
27. Provision is in place to ensure young people are not detained unnecessarily by the police when they are arrested and remanded into the care of the local authority. The local authority has taken account of recent changes to the care placement regulations and made provisions to ensure young people remanded in custody are visited and their needs planned for. IROs and youth offending service staff demonstrate good knowledge of the needs of this group of young people and the impact of this change in legislation. Outstanding support is available for looked after children and care leavers who offend, or are at risk of offending, through strong partnership arrangements, exemplified by the Restorative Justice Approach strategy. This has, for example, led to a reduction in the rate of secure remands over the last 12 months.
28. Arrangements to enable looked after children and care leavers to enjoy and achieve are adequate. Although the achievements of the majority of looked after children of school age are good and gaps with their peers are closing, too many care leavers do not have any qualifications by the age of 19 and are not in employment, education or training.
29. The virtual school arrangements to secure the best possible school or alternative education places for each individual child are good. Well-placed and valued advisory teachers ensure that carers, social workers and other

professionals get good support and guidance at the time when a school place needs to be found, as a child starts school or moves between placements. The virtual school is represented on the placement panel and can advise on the Ofsted grade, including the strengths and weaknesses of individual schools being considered. In addition, children with disabilities teams add their expertise when choosing education placements for children with severe and complex disabilities. Partnerships between the virtual school and schools, academies and independent schools in the county are strong so that few school placements break down. This adds to the stability for children who are looked after for long periods.

30. The virtual school supports individual children well through the allocation of specialist support assistants who build strong relationships with children at specific times in their school life and help to keep them on track. Good attention is given to the emotional well-being of children to support them when they are settling or moving between schools. Virtual school staff, including an educational psychologist for looked after children, provide good training and information to schools and carers to enable them to support children well. In most cases seen by inspectors, children and young people say that they enjoy their school and learning. As one representative of local schools put it 'you cannot underestimate the value that one trusted adult has for looked after children – one person can make all the difference between a child turning up happily for school each day or not'.
31. Children's liking for school and the positive relationships they experience is reflected in good attendance for the vast majority of looked after children. For all but a very few, attendance of looked after children is better than that of the overall school population and in line with national averages for looked after children. Despite this, there are still too many days lost through authorised absence and through a few persistently absent young people. The virtual school is tackling these issues through commissioning a specialist organisation to encourage further improvement in attendance for these children from September 2013.
32. There are no looked after children who are permanently excluded from school. The percentage of days lost for looked after children excluded for fixed term periods has fallen consistently for the past three years and is low. In 2012 the Norfolk figure is just over 6% which was below the national average of 12.4% benchmark when comparisons were last available in 2011. Children are promptly offered alternative education while excluded. However, inspectors saw some examples in which children get a mixed programme of face-to-face and distance learning, with little contact time for some, so they are at risk of falling behind.
33. Most looked after children make steady progress in attainment from their starting points and some make good progress. The achievement of Norfolk looked after children compares favourably with looked after children in

similar areas and the national average. At the end of Key Stage 2, looked after children in Norfolk are doing as well as looked after children nationally. The proportion of looked after children reaching Level 4 in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 has risen steadily and is in line with the national average of 50%.

34. By the end of Key Stage 4, the proportion of looked after young people achieving five or more GCSE at grades A* to C is better than the national average for other looked after children. Although results have fallen back after a good year in 2011, in 2012, at 19.4%, the results are better than those for looked after children in similar areas and nationally. In the context of the standards of education in Norfolk, the gap between the proportion of looked after children and all children in Norfolk achieving this good set of grades is narrower than the national gap and decreasing over time, although not consistently.
35. The virtual school collates the results for all looked after children at each stage and monitors trends to know where to focus efforts to improve teaching and support. Schools monitor children's progress on an individual basis and report through children's PEPs and to the virtual school. Individual children's needs for support are quickly identified but no overview of looked after children's progress is collated and tracked by the virtual school. Firm plans are in place to gather progress data to help the virtual school identify gaps effectively from September 2013.
36. The PEPs seen by inspectors were not all good quality. Generally they record children's ethnicity, gender and language and cover the views of the children and young people well. The expressed views of a range of professionals and carers and parents were often seen. Some were linked well to children's individual educational plans and to their Statements of Educational Need, if they were eligible to have one. However, too many had scant information about health needs and about attainment and progress. Although the virtual school trains teachers and social workers to complete PEPs, there is no quality assurance system or regular audit in place to make sure completed plans are high quality.
37. All looked after children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are in good or better schools in Norfolk. When children and young people are placed in special schools outside the county, these placements are good or better. The progress of children with disabilities is carefully tracked and monitored in children's looked after children reviews which are often held with PEP, initial education plans, pathway plan and transition plan reviews so that complex sets of needs are met well.
38. Pupil Premium funds are used well by schools to enrich individual children's learning in music, sports and outdoor pursuits. The premium money is also used to provide additional tuition, not just when coming up to exams, but throughout a child's school life which has a good impact on

pupils' achievements. Younger looked after children have a wide range of pursuits outside school. They talk in their reviews about a wide variety of interests and recreational learning. Children and their carers make good use of libraries and leisure facilities and popular residential opportunities. It is evident in files seen by inspectors that older care leavers have far fewer opportunities and less support to continue enjoyable leisure interests.

39. Opportunities for children, young people and care leavers to make a positive contribution are adequate. Norfolk has made improvements in the involvement of looked after children and care leavers in making decisions about services for them. However, the voice of young people is still insufficiently developed for all looked after children and young people.
40. There are many examples of CiCC members influencing the shape of services. PEPs are now more focused on gaining the views of children and young people and CiCC members are also advising on the format of pathway plans to make it easier to see the impact of young people's views. CiCC members regularly take part in recruitment and selection, they have helped plan the refurbishment of a local authority children's home and they contribute to training materials and speak at multi-agency events. The CiCC is being used effectively to learn and promote understanding of the needs of children from black and minority ethnic groups and young travellers. The CiCC has also put some ideas forward around how the cultural needs of looked after children can be best met, these issues are being considered for inclusion in training for foster carers.
41. Young people in the CiCC are particularly proud of and pleased with the opportunities they have to talk directly to elected members and in the support they receive from the participation officer. However, many children do not know about and are not involved in these activities. The benefits of participation are not having a positive impact on the wider group of children in care. It is significant that those children and young people who spoke with inspectors who are not involved in CiCC said they had not heard of the council's pledge to looked after children.
42. The number of children and young people who participate in their review is low. Only 80.6% participated in 2012/13. The views of looked after children regarding their reviews are not yet routinely collated, analysed and lessons learned to help influence the shape of the service. The IRO service acknowledges this. However, the CiCC is involved in improving the format of reviews designed to increase looked after children and young people's participation.
43. Children and young people we talked to who have experienced long term, stability in their placements and who have been in care from an early age express good levels of satisfaction with comments such as 'I like my social worker'. However, despite this those young people were unaware of

changes in policy, such as for sleepovers, and of other resources available to them.

44. The complaints service is not well understood or widely used by looked after children and young people. Younger children who spoke with inspectors said they 'did not know how to make a formal complaint'. Older children said that they 'do not use the complaint route because it is too long winded and they are not taken seriously'. However, close interrogation of the most recent management information confirmed that when a complaint is made this is usually resolved at an early stage and when a complaint is upheld swift action is taken to resolve issues. However the use of independent advocates to support looked after children to make a complaint is not known, understood or widely used and no examples were given of learning from complaints or subsequent service improvements.
45. The impact of services to improve the economic wellbeing of looked after young people and care leavers is inadequate. The performance gap in educational achievement is not narrowing significantly for young people and care leavers. Action to address this has been too slow and ineffective with 43% of care leavers categorised as not in education, employment or training (NEET). This is well above rates for similar authorities and the national average. Although a clear strategy to improve looked after children and care leavers employment, education and training is in place, measures such as the availability of high quality support for apprenticeships, are at an early stage of implementation.
46. The council has been slow to recognise the opportunities that it can provide as an employer to support young people into the work environment. Although there are some examples of good work undertaken by social workers to re-engage care leavers who had come late to the care system into education or training many care leavers (more than 35% compared with 11% of all year 11s) do not have any qualifications by the age of 19, which has a major impact on their current and future life chances.
47. Raising aspirations starts early for those children who are in the care system and many of these children achieve well with a significant number going on to university. For many who enter the care system as teenagers however, outcomes are poor overall. These young people try different routes to education, employment and training (EET) but often do not sustain a particular path and fail to realise their full potential.
48. The current arrangements to support pathway planning are inadequate. Too few young people have a completed pathway plan and many are not reviewed on time. Some of the most recent pathway plans seen by inspectors are of good quality. Young people with a pathway plan who spoke with inspectors were very clear about their plans and positive about

their future. The CiCC is actively helping to support improvement in this vitally important area of work.

49. Most young people are in accommodation that they choose and it is good quality. However, there is too little accommodation for young people with high needs for support in transition to independence, particularly young people who have come into care at an older age.

Quality of provision

Grade 4 (inadequate)

50. The quality of provision is inadequate.
51. Although the majority of children, young people and care leavers are in placements judged good or better by Ofsted, too many children do not have a care plan and not all children are visited regularly by a social worker.
52. Inspectors saw some examples of good social worker interventions which are making a discernible difference to children's lives. Also family support workers are, where appropriate, forming good working relationships with children, seeing them regularly and undertaking specific planned work to complement work being undertaken by social workers. However, social workers do not always have the time they need to complete the social work task. Although children are allocated to an individual social worker, in some cases non-qualified staff are undertaking all statutory case work, including visits to children and attending their reviews. In these situations, social workers do not adequately know their children and are not equipped to make decisions about their lives. This does not comply with statutory guidance.
53. Legal planning meetings are used to good effect to establish whether the threshold for care proceedings is met and good work with partners and through the Local Family Justice Board ensures care proceedings are completed without avoidable delay. Children and young people who need to be looked after are not all in appropriate placements. Good, targeted action has reduced the use of out of county residential placements over the past 12 months. However, the number of children in other placements outside Norfolk remains high with 193 children currently placed outside the county in 25 other local authority areas although the majority of these are placed over the borders in Suffolk (86), Lincolnshire (39) and Cambridgeshire (24). The number placed more than 20 miles from home is also too high.
54. The arrangements to ensure permanency for children are improving. The adoption service has increased the number of adopters approved and timescales for their recruitment have been reduced from 12 months to 6

months. The average time children wait to move into their permanent adoption home is below the national average. However there are too many children who have been waiting for an adoption placement for more than six months.

55. The quality of children and young people's assessments is too variable. Assessments seen by inspectors range from good to poor and too many are delayed. The local authority's own audit of the sample of cases selected for the inspection identified that in one third of the assessments the analysis was inadequate. The quality and timeliness of assessments remains a challenge from the previous looked after children service inspection in 2011.
56. Despite some recent improvement, the number of children in care without a care plan remains high at 68. Almost half of those who should have a pathway plan do not have one. Performance in these key areas of service operation remain a challenge from the previous looked after children service inspection in 2011. The quality of the most recent care plans completed is adequate and improving as a result of team training on standards agreed with the Quality Assurance team. In many cases, actions are not underpinned by specified timescales. Some care plans for children who are being looked after long term, with no identified contact time with their parents, do not address whether an independent visitor should be appointed.
57. In most cases, the views of looked after children and young people and their parents are sought as part of assessments and plans. However, the cultural needs of children are not always routinely considered in care planning and important life story work was not completed for some children in long term foster placements to reflect their identity and the changes they have experienced.
58. Performance on the timely completion of looked after children's statutory reviews has improved from a low base, however, 32% of children do not have their review completed within the required timescale. IRO caseloads are high at 90-95 making it difficult to meet demand for timely completion of statutory reviews and also for IROs to track cases effectively and cover for colleagues in times of their absence. This is seriously impacting the quality of monitoring and on-going progress planning for some children. Although IROs can demonstrate some effective challenge in individual children's cases, the service does not systematically gather evidence of the impact of their work in challenging plans and practice. Close scrutiny of cases seen by inspectors identified that IROs failed to challenge some poor practice at reviews, such as drift in arranging the final contact for a parent and core assessments that required updating. Inspectors also found that social workers do not consistently provide written reports for looked after children reviews. In some cases seen by inspectors there were delays in ensuring IRO review reports were uploaded to children's

files in a timely way, and in a small number of cases they were not available three months after the review had taken place.

59. Children who spoke to inspectors said that they have good relationships with their foster carers and feel they can talk to them about their worries. Some children said they had too many changes of social worker and felt they did not get to know them. Some young people said they have had difficulty getting in touch with their social worker and don't know who to contact in their absence. Some said their social worker spends very little time with them when they do see them. However, the situation is much better for children with complex disabilities.
60. Case records are generally up to date. However, there are delays in review reports being circulated and there is no evidence on many files that children, young people and carers have received a copy of assessments and plans or had these explained to them as a basis for on-going work.

Leadership and management

Grade 4 (inadequate)

61. Leadership and management are inadequate.
62. The local authority is not yet providing effective and ambitious leadership for the looked after children and care leavers service. The corporate parenting strategy is not yet in place. Although improvement plans have been in place for much of 2013, the local authority has only just recently identified resources to take their plans forward. This includes firm plans to increase the social work workforce across children's social care by 50% and to increase the IRO capacity. Recent decisions to strengthen the senior management team, proposals for the implementation of organisational change and plans for the re-design of the service provide a sound basis for improvement. The proposed reconfiguration of services also includes enhancing the edge of care provision. Although partner agency representatives who met with inspectors are committed to strengthening the early help offer for looked after children, arrangements for shared and pooled budgets to support change are underdeveloped. This poses a risk to the successful implementation of this aspect of the improvement plan.
63. Managers and those responsible for the provision of looked after children's services have ensured that children are nearly always placed in good or better service provision. This has made a difference, leading to improved life chances for looked after children. The majority of children experience stable placements of which a high proportion are placed with families in either the local authority's own fostering or independent fostering service provision. However, insufficient priority has been given to early help, edge of care services. The looked after population is too high, numbers are still

rising and resources are not sufficiently targeted and coordinated to effectively support families to prevent children's situations escalating so they are received into the care of the local authority.

64. Some improvements have been made to address known areas of weakness and deliver on new and complex areas of work. The adoption service has been reconfigured to meet national timescales for placing children whose plan is permanence through adoption, and there has been an increase in the number of adoptive carers recruited over the past year. Joint multi-agency initiatives to tackle some complex areas of work such as CSE and children missing from care are increasingly effective in ensuring children are safe.
65. The local authority has implemented a development plan following the last safeguarding and looked after children services inspection. Although there has been some improvement, actions have not ensured that the statutory responsibilities of the council are met in key areas of performance such as care planning and case review. Overall the pace of change has been too slow so, for example, although strategies are in place to reduce the high numbers of young people not in employment, education or training, they are not yet having an impact. The accommodation strategy for 16 and 17 year old homeless young people has been implemented successfully for the majority of care leavers and the improvements in the range of accommodation within Norfolk has been effective over the last 12 months allowing more care leavers to be placed within their communities.
66. Scrutiny provided by elected members and management oversight of the strategic leadership of the local authority has not ensured the statutory responsibilities of the council are met. There is insufficient understanding of the principles of corporate parenting within the broad group of councillors, and although lead members recognised the need to address this, there has not been effective ongoing scrutiny of looked after children services. Also, planned meetings of the Corporate Strategic Parenting Board are too infrequent for the Board to actively oversee progress and provide challenge with the rigour that is necessary to drive improvement of the looked after children's services.
67. The local authority monitoring and reporting arrangements include key indicators for looked after children, providing a good breakdown of performance which is 'traffic lighted' across different teams, reporting strengths as well as poor performance. Improvements in performance management and evaluation have led to improvement, for example in timescales for looked after children's health assessments and statutory reviews from a low base. Statistical neighbour and national data is used where available to benchmark performance. Improvements have also been seen in the timeliness of care proceedings, achieved through robust case management, as well as close working with Cafcass and the judiciary. This achievement places Norfolk in the top 10% of local

authorities nationally. However, the performance management and evaluation system has not ensured robust reporting of performance in important areas relating to the statutory responsibilities of the local authority. For example, how many children do not have a statutory visit made by a qualified social worker, or have an up-to-date care plan or pathway plan.

68. Outcomes from case auditing have been used effectively to highlight strengths and weaknesses in individual social workers' practice and findings are used well to provide briefings, training and seminars. For example, the 'managers development' programme has focused on a range of issues such as the quality of report writing, care planning, and supervisory practice. Although improvements in these areas have been identified, inspectors found inconsistent practice, with management oversight too variable between teams and poor quality recording and follow up of actions identified in supervision. Although the local authority's own audits in May 2013 identified that supervision practice is not consistent, some good records were seen and there was evidence of reflection and challenge. However, in the small number of cases sampled by inspectors where all the statutory case work was being undertaken by family support workers, there was no evidence of monthly manager's oversight on case files.
69. The role of the IRO service in quality assuring work undertaken is not always effective, with current pressures on workload taking caseloads beyond the recommended levels of 50-70. There are no arrangements for the findings of IRO work to be aggregated, analysed and reported to influence service improvement.
70. The high and rising number of looked after children who require a placement is stretching the capacity of placement sufficiency locally. Nevertheless, effective action has been taken to enhance the local authority and independent fostering arrangements to enable 75% of children to be placed within families. Block and spot purchase commissioning with independent providers has been effectively reviewed to ensure needs are met. The new Rolling Select List of Approved Residential Placements is helping to set a realistic stable price for placements across the sector. The development of a specialist clinical service within the commissioning team is helping to devise bespoke packages of care for some children and young people on the edge of care, and to looked after children who need specialist support to enable them to stay within the county. Good action has been taken to reduce the numbers of children placed outside the county in residential care and numbers of children placed in this type of provision is now low.
71. The council has invested in a programme of training to meet the identified needs of staff and newly qualified social workers. There is good access to training for staff in residential and fieldwork teams. Procedures to improve

workers' understanding of CSE and missing children have been successfully disseminated to raise awareness across the service, including commissioned services. For example, specific training for foster carers to help them recognise the early signs of CSE and act accordingly has been undertaken.

72. There are some examples of creative use of resources, for example, using the adoption grant to redesign and increase capacity in the adoption team and managing the local market to reduce costs in the private sector through the effective commissioning strategy. This has achieved a reduction in unit cost per looked after child to provide good value for money. However the service overall is not currently offering good value for money as children on the edge of care are not getting services at an early stage and many children are entering the care system too late when their outcomes have been compromised.

Record of main findings

Services for looked after children

Overall effectiveness	Inadequate
Capacity to improve	Inadequate
Outcomes for looked after children and young people	Inadequate
Quality of provision	Inadequate
Leadership and management	Inadequate