

# Inspection of Kent County Council children's services

**Inspection dates:** 9 to 20 May 2022

**Lead inspector:** Margaret Burke, Her Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Children are at the centre of Kent County Council's culture and practice. This has enabled more of its children to benefit from services which are of a consistently good standard, resulting in positive outcomes for them and their families. Outstanding practice is evident for children in care and care experienced young people as they clearly benefit from the support they receive and make good progress.

Senior leaders have taken effective action in the areas identified at the last inspection in 2017. Progress is evident in all the areas identified for improvement, but further work is required to strengthen the response to homeless young people aged 16 and 17 years. Senior leaders have also taken the required steps to make improvements in the areas identified at the focused visit in 2019, strengthening the responses to children at the 'front door' of their services and ensuring children are quickly directed to the most appropriate services. More recent challenges relate to high social work caseloads in some frontline teams. Steps are being taken to manage and reduce the negative impact of this rise on Kent's children and their families and on the staff who work closely with them.

The work to improve services continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders successfully managed additional pressures, adjusting services effectively to ensure they continued to serve children and their families. Staff have been supported to manage the impact of the pandemic on them personally and to continue to manage changes to their working practices.

Kent children's services have had to respond to the unparalleled numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in the county. The management of this additional workload has resulted in senior leaders contributing significantly to the national response while also continuing to manage local services effectively across a large county council with 12 districts. At times, the local and national demands have been challenging to balance. Senior leaders and frontline staff have responded well to these exceptional pressures on service delivery. As a result, the unaccompanied asylum-seeking children Kent County Council takes responsibility for are well cared for and services for all vulnerable children in Kent have continued to improve.

### **What needs to improve?**

- The practice of conducting visits to children during school hours, resulting in them missing lessons.
- Manageable caseloads and workload support for social workers and their managers.
- The response and the quality of assessment of need for young people aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good**

1. Children and their families have access to a good range of early help support services. Early help practitioners base their work on the development of purposeful relationships and creative direct work to gain a sound understanding of the child's voice, wishes and feelings within their family network. Most families are swiftly supported through strength-based interventions to build resilience and make changes to improve their children's and family's experiences. Effective communication with other professionals ensures children's progress is reviewed, and support is refined to best meet their needs. As intervention concludes, a structured framework of moving forward plans provides families with guidance and information to continue to help themselves. When progress is not evident or circumstances change, the interface between early help and statutory social work services is clear and work is appropriately transferred between services to ensure a prompt response.
2. The response to requests for help from children's social care is effective. Children's needs and concerns about their welfare are identified and responded to swiftly by practitioners in the front door and the out-of-hours services. Thresholds are appropriately applied, and there is evidence of thorough management oversight and guidance at this stage, leading to timely and effective follow-up action for the vast majority of children. The work in the front door of services is supported by strong and supportive practitioner relationships within the team and with partners including health, education and police. These positively inform initial decision-making and the management of risk of harm.
3. When there are concerns about risk of harm to children, these are urgently responded to by the multi-agency network, with thorough exploration of

immediate risk and concerns. This leads to children being promptly and appropriately safeguarded. Children are seen and spoken to, and appropriate steps are taken to gain parental consent and to ensure parents are kept updated.

4. Since the last inspection, leaders have successfully secured the agreement of all 12 district councils for a whole-county housing protocol for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. Despite considerable progress in this area, there are still some children aged 16 and 17 facing homelessness who do not receive a timely or effective response. The assessment of their circumstances does not routinely explore or take into consideration all their needs and circumstances to ensure that appropriate support is provided at the earliest opportunity.
5. Social workers undertake a range of assessments to understand the needs and experiences of children and their families and to help inform plans to positively progress change in their situation. Assessments are informative and dynamic, with good consideration of historical information, need and risk. They are helpfully explicit in highlighting worries, concerns and strengths. While children's individual identity needs are described in their assessments, more is needed to ensure they are explored sufficiently and lead to tangible actions to meet these needs within their plans. Plans for children are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect changes and progress. These then inform and guide meaningful multi-agency work with families. Stronger examples of plans seen were written directly to children, with clarity about goals; weaker plans mostly related to child in need arrangements, and did not explore all needs identified by the assessment and lacked clarity regarding action. While system sign-off by managers indicates their oversight of records, managers' comments, guidance and steer are not always evident on these forms.
6. The work of the children and families social work teams is generally of good quality. Children make progress and their situations improve through sensitive, intensive and focused work with families. Families are helped to identify support and make the changes needed to meet their children's needs. Social workers demonstrate strong engagement with children and their families, persisting even when working with parents in challenging situations.
7. There is generally good consideration of the work that needs to be done and the progress that needs to be achieved during the pre-proceedings stages of the Public Law Outline and in the Family Drug and Alcohol Court. In both, families receive intensive support to enable them to provide ongoing care for their children. Social workers also actively consider all viable options. Family group conferencing is regularly used to support purposeful planning and consideration of help from wider family and friends' networks. If children's circumstances do not improve within set timeframes and children are unable to remain at home, there is full exploration of family members who are willing and able to provide care.
8. Most children are seen regularly by social workers or support workers. Their workers show personal warmth and use a wide range of direct-work tools to assist and support children, including those who are very young, to express

their views. Parents who spoke to inspectors were unanimously positive about their engagement with social workers and the support they receive.

9. Many social workers in the children's social work teams, disabled children, and young people's teams, including some workers in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), currently have high caseloads. Some social workers indicated that their workload is manageable and most say they are well supported by their line managers and teams. Social workers acknowledged that high caseloads impacted on their ability to carry out some of the additional tasks they would like to do with families and to sustain and maintain up-to-date children's case records. For most children, the higher caseloads carried by their social workers have not had a direct negative impact on their experiences. However, it is fully acknowledged by leaders that high levels of complex and demanding case work are not sustainable for social workers and their managers. Workers generally receive regular supervision, which supports them and their work. While management oversight of frontline practice and decision-making is stronger and more consistent in work where there is evidence of significant concern and risk, it is not regular or effective enough to oversee all case work and avoid drift in plans for a small number of children.
10. Social workers have a good understanding of domestic abuse, substance misuse and poor mental health, recognising the risk, harm and the possible impact on children. Appropriate and timely action is taken to protect children in these families. The impact of long-term neglect and trauma on children's development is well understood and workers make good use of the multi-agency network, referring families to specialist services that work effectively with victims and perpetrators to keep children safe.
11. Appropriate steps are taken to ensure that children in private fostering arrangements are safeguarded effectively. The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in reduced numbers of children in these arrangements, and the range of private fostering awareness-raising activity continues. Clear arrangements for notification, backed by specialist advice and support, ensure that private fostering assessments include all the required safeguarding checks and keep children's welfare at their core. Children are visited in line with requirements, permanence is considered throughout and these arrangements are routinely reviewed within timescale.
12. When children go missing, most receive a clear and timely response. Following their return, children are offered an opportunity to talk to either their own social worker or a worker from the adolescent or early help team, when the reason for going missing is explored and support offered. For a small number of these children, not enough professional curiosity is shown in these discussions, and they are not thorough enough in the consideration of risks and influences.
13. By working in partnership with leading academics and authorities since the last inspection, Kent County Council has made considerable improvements to responses, services and support to children at risk of contextualised harm. Children who are identified as being at risk of contextualised harm are well supported by the adolescent team and county-wide services, who are

responsive in times of crisis, offering flexible opening times, including working at evenings and weekends. The adolescent team workers fully consider risks and influences for these children, enabling them and others to better manage risk and minimise harm while supporting the child and their family. The range of support on offer is tailored to children's needs, and might include telephone support, direct work with young people or outreach. For some children, it simply involves taking them to school. The response has enabled children to be supported earlier, thereby avoiding further harm and resulting in improved outcomes for many.

14. Appropriately robust measures are in place for making contact with families who elect to home educate, providing support when needed and monitoring over time. When it is in the best interests of the child, they provide appropriate support and challenge to return children to school.
15. The number of pupils identified as not in full-time education in Kent is higher than the national average. This partly reflects the thorough approach taken, with a deliberate decision made to keep children's names on records, rechecking whether they are still out of education when all avenues have been exhausted. Officers have clear and suitably rigorous approaches to securing appropriate education for those who need it.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: outstanding**

16. Children come into Kent County Council's care when this is the most appropriate plan for them. For most children, this happens in a planned and timely way. Children are supported to live in homes, including adoptive homes, with their brothers and sisters when this meets their wishes and is in their best interests.
17. Clear processes and systems support the referral and coordination of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children transferring into the care of Kent County Council. Vulnerable children are identified and urgent concerns prioritised in collaboration with the Home Office, increasing safety and reducing risk for these children. Following referral to Kent, newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are provided with support in line with their individual needs and accommodated in a timely way. Oversight of referrals, need and risks for this group of children, to ensure safety, child-focused services and placement planning, is successfully coordinated at both an operational and strategic management level.
18. Children's need for long-term stability and emotional security is well understood and embedded in the culture of children's social work teams. Children's long-term living arrangements are considered early and permanence planning arrangements, which are reviewed regularly by the professional network surrounding the child, keep permanence plans on track and enable children to understand that they can stay and feel settled where they live.

19. Social workers get to know the children they support and form positive relationships with them. They see children regularly and talk with them about things that are important to them. Social workers are persistent in maintaining relationships with children who live in homes outside the Kent County Council area. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) also maintain effective oversight of children out of area and monitor their progress, in addition to chairing their reviews.
20. Good attention is given to the cultural and identity needs of children in care, and these are thoughtfully and sensitively addressed. Social workers know how important family time is to children in care and skilfully plan ways in which arrangements can be promoted and managed safely in line with children's wishes, creating enduring support networks and family links.
21. Children's review meetings explore children's holistic needs and how being in care meets these needs. IROs lead high-quality reviews which, with their robust oversight and scrutiny of children's plans, actively prevent drift and delay. Review meeting records are addressed and written to the child. There is a strong commitment to ensuring that review meetings are tailored individually to each child. Children spoke about being able to chair their review meetings, with feedback including that this 'sometimes works well and sometimes doesn't work so well'. Children told inspectors that their reviews and other meetings frequently take place at school during lesson time, which meant that they sometimes missed lessons they really like.
22. When a child may need to move to a new home, their individual needs are well understood, enabling suitable well-matched placements to be identified for them to move to. Children are extremely well supported by their social workers through periods of transition and placement moves to ensure they secure the most well-matched long-term home. When possible, children are age-appropriately involved in assessing the suitability of their new carers.
23. Family group conferences provide the backbone to Kent's commitment to exploring homes for children within their extended family and friend networks. This enables social workers to find suitable homes, and for some children avoids the need to come into the authority's care. Kent's work with its connected carers is a strong area of practice, with thoughtful and sensitive assessments undertaken with those offering their homes to children. Fully assessed connected carers retain the same status and support given to other foster carers. Ongoing support, fees and allowances continue for carers on staying together plans when they secure special guardianship orders, enabling many children to exit care and secure permanence and security in familiar environments.
24. Adoption is appropriately considered if this is the right plan for children. Children are sensitively prepared and supported on their journey to adoption. Adopters are very positive about their training, preparation and support for them and their children. A small number of children have experienced delay in being supported with life-story work, but the quality of the life-story work when undertaken is of a high standard.

25. There is regular senior management scrutiny and oversight of those children and young people with complex needs who are placed in unregistered or unregulated settings.
26. Children are only placed in unregistered placements if the authority has not been able to find appropriate placements which are registered to meet these children's complex needs. These arrangements are rightly considered as unlawful and highly monitored by senior leaders, with higher levels of visiting and support as efforts are made to promote and ensure registration or move children on.
27. The vast majority of children in care we spoke to say that they feel safe where they live. Most children in care live in homes where they are supported to do well. Kent has higher than national numbers of children in its own provision, many of them in the care of experienced and long-standing foster carers. Positive experiences and progress are evident for many of Kent's children in care. Many children gain stability and feel part of their carer's family, re-engage in education and now have trusted support.
28. Foster carers are universally positive about their support, including from children's social workers. This also includes working with the virtual school, which is supportive, responsive and helpful in signposting carers towards enrichment activities that match children's interests and needs.
29. Disabled children and young people who are in the care of the local authority are provided with exceptional support from their social workers, whose care and commitment shines through their work. Children are supported to remain in contact with their family even when they do not live with them. Written notes of visits show lovely rich communication with children using a wide range of styles, including some as basic as touch and reading facial expressions. This communication helps build strong trusting relationships. Children's needs are championed to ensure that they get the best care and support.
30. Most children leave care in a positive and planned way, either through achieving permanence or returning home to live with their parent. Decisions regarding children being placed with parents are made following a full assessment, when this is the best option for the child. These children are seen regularly by their social workers. Arrangements are kept under review to ensure that they continue to meet children's needs and to consider the discharge of the care order.
31. Children's health needs, including up-to-date dentist and optician appointments, are well considered, despite delays caused by the pandemic. Children are supported to enjoy interests and encouraged to take up hobbies. Children told us they would like more sensitivity shown in language used, particularly at school, or in relation to anything that might show that they are in care, such as wearing a council lanyard on visits out with them and in meetings at school during school hours.
32. Virtual school leaders are driven by a sense of purpose and ambition for children in care in Kent. They are the first virtual school to be awarded the

National Nurturing Schools programme award, which recognises practice that is central to their work. They are supported by a well-considered infrastructure of workers that helps to provide consistency across the county. Their work to offer training and support to schools around relevant issues such as trauma is a particular strength. Schools are positive about the high quality of support they and their pupils receive from the virtual school.

33. Personal education plans are fit for purpose, although leaders recognise where they could be more explicit, for example in capturing the voice of the child and the foster carers. Through strong support, most pupils are on track to achieve appropriate academic outcomes.
34. Care experienced young people receive ongoing and regular support that helps them to make progress. Personal advisers (PAs) invest time in building relationships with the young people they support. PAs know the young people they work with well, and for many young people these supportive relationships are maintained until they reach the age of 25. The Lifelong Links service is used by young people to make contact or safely re-engage with extended family members and other significant people they have lost contact with, to develop these relationships and build networks that will extend beyond their time in care.
35. PAs demonstrate a good understanding of the importance of cultural identity and responding to young people's individual needs. They recognise the importance for many young people, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, of living in communities which reflect their faith, culture and language, and respond positively to these needs.
36. Trusted and reliable relationships are at the core of the support provided to care leavers. Care experienced young people are supported to be proud of their achievements and to celebrate their passions and hobbies. PAs are passionate and speak with sensitivity about the challenges some care experienced young people have faced and how they have overcome these.
37. Pathway plans contain the young person's voice and demonstrate their involvement in creating their plans. A strength-based focus draws out positive elements and strengths for young people, as their needs are identified and are pulled together into a relevant plan of support.
38. Skilfully tailored packages of support help redress the impact of early trauma and limited educational opportunities. This support enables care experienced young people to continue to develop their skills and confidence and to access work and education opportunities. Performance data confirms Kent has higher numbers of care experienced young people than other areas who have successfully gained entry to college, university degree courses or employment, despite sometimes significant gaps in their educational history.
39. Most young people are living in appropriate accommodation, including staying put arrangements. There are various accommodation options available, which range from shared accommodation or supported lodgings to housing from a core group of providers. However, the quality of these placements varies. When



it is known that a young person's accommodation no longer meets their needs, they are supported to find alternatives. There are still recognised challenges in some districts which prevent care experienced young people from having timely access to public housing post-18. The authority continues to seek ways to address this.

40. Care experienced young people continue to be supported after the age of 21 by PAs who provide an invaluable degree of emotional and practical support. This includes ongoing support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, those who are parents and need additional support, and young people who have additional vulnerabilities and health needs. Care experienced young people in custody are also supported well and have regular contact and visits from PAs.
41. Kent routinely employs care experienced adults as young apprentices in the council's participation service. Several young people have successfully completed their apprenticeships and are now in employment with the service. The impact they have is a particular strength of the council.

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

42. Despite the significant challenges created by the pandemic and the exceptional circumstances created by the need to safeguard and care for high numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, support for vulnerable children in Kent has improved over a sustained period of time. Social work practice is consistently good and often better, meaning children are well protected and cared for.
43. The politicians in Kent County Council are committed to championing the needs of children, including vulnerable children, and this is backed by sound financial investment. Alongside the director of children's services and his senior management team, the lead member for children's services and the head of paid services keep themselves well appraised of key challenges and service issues, exercising appropriate oversight and scrutiny. The council promotes corporate problem-solving and shared responsibility for its services. Council departments and sectors work together to ensure all their services positively impact on children who need the council's support.
44. Strategic and operational partnership working across the county council is a strength. Effective strategic plans form the foundations for practice and multi-agency working. Clear lines of accountability and effective governance arrangements track the operational impact services make for children. These arrangements include ongoing negotiations with strategic partners and government departments in order to continue to secure the best arrangements for Kent's children. This is well evidenced through Kent's negotiations with the Home Office to promote appropriate arrangements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in its area.

45. The local authority provides appropriate steer and has brought strong leadership to the local multi-agency safeguarding partnership, although there have been some recent challenges with consistency of membership and business support. Despite these challenges, the focus on learning from serious incidents has persisted and is clearly evidenced. For example, the recent work on non-accidental injuries in babies under one has led to service improvements and practice changes to ensure the safety of these children. Tackling child exploitation and child sexual exploitation is also high on the partnership's agenda. Services have been developed through partnership work with the University of Bedfordshire and peer reviews, leading to the development of an extensive multi-agency safeguarding response. Senior leaders, managers and partners track progress and outcomes for exploited children, and robust multi-agency frameworks underpin practice.
46. Leaders have successfully secured a whole-county housing protocol across the 12 district councils. However, leaders accept that the individual response to children aged 16 and 17 who are facing homelessness is an area which requires further work.
47. Leaders across Kent County Council demonstrate that they are ambitious parents to children in their care. The corporate parenting role is well embedded within the council. The recently appointed chair brings genuine care and passion to the role and a new perspective which builds on the successes of the previous chair. The pandemic did not deter the council from celebrating the successes of its children in care as it continued virtually with its annual awards ceremony to celebrate their achievements. Surprised and delighted children received unexpected visitors at their door with gifts, with photos and video taken to capture these moments and provide invaluable memories.
48. Children's participation is well promoted within the council. The council routinely seeks to learn from children through online surveys, complaints and other mechanisms to hear their views. Five distinct children and young people's groups cover different age ranges and include a group for foster and adopter family birth children, and together make up an active Children in Care Council. The Children in Care Council is routinely consulted and children are assured that their voices are listened to. Participation and engagement are supported by the very active, creative and vibrant participation team. Their reach is extensive, influencing local, regional and national agendas. The use of challenge cards has successfully led to corporate changes, generated by children and care experienced young adults.
49. Senior leaders and managers have access to an extensive array of performance information and data reports. These reporting frameworks are well established, and regularly scrutinised and tracked. They provide leaders, managers and workers with a comprehensive overview and insight into all aspects of work and performance across children's services.
50. Senior leaders use well-established quality assurance activities effectively to shape organisational change and refresh practice, policy and learning. The views of children and families are regularly sought, with over a third of service

users now responding to these processes. Staff use the opportunity to reflect on their practice, using appreciative inquiries to further understand the impact of their work with children, staff and within the organisation. While quality assurance processes are embedded and are a strength, they continue to evolve. Leaders have recognised the need for further fine tuning to provide additional practice challenge and to ensure that practice information and performance data correlate and provide consistent messages.

51. There is a strong focus on and a commitment to workforce development. Kent has a practice framework and culture which is based on shared values and behaviours. This is implicit in its workforce and learning events and is embedded and well understood by practitioners across the workforce. Through the academy, mandatory e-learning and a range of organised internal and external training events, staff and external partners have access to information, training and tools to strengthen them in their work to support children and their families. Area learning events and the child outcome analysis programme are among the range of organised activities which provide senior leaders with opportunities to hear staff give their views on issues that affect them in their work. Views which are heard are reflected, when appropriate, in future learning and service development.
52. Workforce pressures in Kent present extreme challenges for senior leaders and managers. Leaders accept that caseloads are too high in parts of the service and are not sustainable. Senior leaders report that caseloads began to rise in December 2021. They have taken and continue to take steps to alleviate workload pressures. In January 2022, leaders commissioned a review to help to better understand social work caseloads and distribution across the authority. This led, in April 2022, to an additional £1.4 million a year being allocated to increase the number of social work posts. The whole council has extended support and agreed special arrangements for children's services to exercise greater flexibility in sourcing locum staff. Additional peripatetic agency social work teams have recently been recruited to support work in key districts under the most pressure. Other support strategies have included redirecting non-case-holding staff, assistant social workers and early help practitioners to provide consistent support with social work tasks, including visits to children. Leaders are monitoring the impact on children and the welfare of and workforce pressures on their staff, and managers are adjusting their responses to ensure they are all well supported.
53. All staff who spoke to inspectors, including those with higher caseloads, were rightly proud of the work they do and proud of the progress they make with children and families to improve their situations. They speak highly and very positively about working in Kent, they 'love' working for Kent, and they feel supported by their colleagues and valued by managers. Most say they are provided with regular, reflective individual and case supervision, which helps them drive forward plans for children and explore the challenges and barriers which may prevent progress being made. Staff, including those in their ASYE, feel they have excellent training and opportunities for further development and career progression. Many staff have worked for Kent for many years.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk).

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence), write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

This report is available at <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: [www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

© Crown copyright 2022