

# **Report into Children's Services in Norfolk following inspection**

**Report for the Secretary of State for  
Education by Dave Hill, Commissioner  
for Children's Services in Norfolk**

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## **Background and history**

1. The recent past for Norfolk Children's Services has been a troubled one. In early 2013 services for the protection of children in Norfolk were rated by Ofsted as Inadequate. In mid 2013 services for Children Looked After were inspected and were also judged to be inadequate. In the period prior to the 2013 inspections, children's services were previously inspected by Ofsted in June 2011, both Safeguarding and Looked After Children were rated at this time as adequate.
2. In July 2015 Norfolk Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted under the single assessment framework (SIF), the intervening period between the 2013 and the SIF was characterised by considerable activity both within Norfolk and from outside too. Several reviews, an improvement board, and an injection of resources, an interim management team at the top of children's services, followed by permanent appointments at DCS and Assistant Director level. Expectations were that a rating of a minimum of 'requires improvement' would be achieved in the SIF. Even if 'requires improvement' had been achieved the service would have only returned back to 2011 levels of quality. There is no room for further delay, the future must now focus on sustained and embedded change that will take Norfolk Children's services to good and beyond – the children, young people and families in Norfolk deserve nothing less.

## **Progress and prognosis**

3. In the Ofsted single inspection progress was noted in key areas – children in need of help and protection, adoption performance and leadership, management and governance – these three areas were judged to be requiring improvement, an improvement on the 2013 judgements of inadequate. I have spent much time with staff at all levels and with the LSCB chair discussing how progress was achieved in these areas. It was clear that where clear leadership had been evident, then progress was achieved. The challenge now is to bring similar leadership to Looked After Children and Leaving Care services, whilst not losing momentum, pace or focus in other areas.
4. In the areas of 'Children looked after and achieving permanence' and 'experiences and progress of care leavers' services were rated as inadequate. This report comes as a direct consequence on those two inadequate judgements and the fact that therefore services overall continue to be rated as inadequate overall.
5. At the bottom line, children and young people in Norfolk are failing to reach their potential and good outcomes, it is not good enough that the improvement journey is taking so long. Some fundamental building blocks were simply not present

when the SIF took place, personal education plans, LAC health assessments and leaving care pathway plans were inconsistent, of poor quality and in many cases simply absent.

6. Norfolk shared data with Ofsted as part of their self-assessment which was simply incorrect. The ability of the leaving care services to keep in contact with young people was said to be seriously deficient, 190 young people were reported as having no contact with Norfolk Children's Services. Had this figure been accurate it would have been extremely concerning, but in fact the data proved to be inaccurate and presented a more concerning picture than was actually present on the ground\*. However, the fact that such misleading data was gathered and presented to Ofsted was in itself an indictment of the data, information and quality assurance system.

\*subsequent to the inspection the 190 young people have been reviewed and contacted.

7. Put simply the improvement journey since the 2013 inadequate inspections has not delivered with focus and pace the services that will improve the lives and outcomes for children in Norfolk. Undoubtedly there have been improvements and these were noted by Ofsted in the SIF and are evident to myself as the Children's Commissioner. Safeguarding services are now more secure, the Norfolk Children's Safeguarding Board has progressed multi agency work and these is now a more honest and realistic dialogue between partners. The work of the MASH has improved the assessment and triage of new cases. There is a much greater sense of purpose to safeguarding work, with 'Signs of Safety' having brought about a cultural change that is driving improvements to practice.
8. In particular the basic shape and structure of the Council's children's social care service is now fit for purpose and this is an important platform on which to build. However, I observe that getting these structures into place has taken too long and during the process of reshaping the key focus on service improvement was delayed. For instance the dedicated leaving care service did not come into place until September 2015, several months after the Ofsted SIF. It would have been preferable to have moved with much greater pace and focus in this key area.
9. I will contain my recommendations to a small number of key and critical areas that if implemented will result in a return Ofsted visit leading to a minimum judgement of 'requires improvement' in all areas. Norfolk need to be on the 'front foot' in terms of readiness for Ofsted re-inspection and stay in regular dialogue with Ofsted as part of the three monthly monitoring visits.
10. Put simply, the pace and focus that has paid off in safeguarding in Norfolk, needs to be applied also to the key areas that Ofsted judged as Inadequate in the SIF,

namely Looked After Children and Leaving Care services. The ability to 'multi task' on the improvement journey, ensuring pace and focus on every area of children's services, is the key question that must be confronted and tackled. Therefore, I have also taken time to review continuing progress on safeguarding, to ensure that efforts to date are not diminished or momentum lost.

11. It is critical that the improvement journey is not just seen as a road to 'requires improvement', but is stretching and ambitious across all children services for good and outstanding outcomes for children.

## **Critical Areas for Action**

### **Children Looked After and Leaving Care strategy and approach**

12. There has hitherto been a lack of a strategy in these key areas. This has now been rectified and a 2016-2019 strategy has been approved, this will form the bedrock for the improvement journey in these areas.
13. In September 2015, the restructure of the Children's Service brought into place dedicated teams for looked after children and also for leaving care. The overarching structure is now based on six geographical areas, with a head of social work responsible for each area, these posts report directly to the assistant director of social work. In effect the six heads of social work are responsible for 'the journey of the child', managing as they do, all aspects of social care services in a defined area. In addition to their geographical responsibilities, each head of social work has a service lead in area (safeguarding, LAC, leaving care etc.). This is to ensure that there is policy and practice consistency across the geographical areas of Norfolk.
14. I have spent time with front line social workers and managers from the Looked After Children and Leaving Care teams and I have observed a renewed focus in these key areas. There is some inconsistency geographically in the pace of implementation, but these are known and are being addressed.
15. Three key criticisms were identified by Ofsted that were fundamentally undermining the work with looked after children and care leavers, the lack of Personal Education Plans (PEPS), the lack of Looked After Children health assessments and the lack of leaving care Pathway Plans. The period post Ofsted SIF (July 2015) and in particular post restructuring (September 2015) have seen good progress in ensuring that these three areas have been tackled.
16. At the end of March 2016, 90% of leaving care pathway plans were in place. The dedicated leaving care service has developed a purposeful programme of work, including regular drop in sessions. There are specialist county wide posts focusing on housing and employment and these specialists are being well used by leaving care staff.
17. Personal education plans are in place for 79% of children, with the compliance continuing to improve.
18. Health assessments for looked after children have been progressed because of a new commitment from the NHS to resource designated LAC doctors. The large

backlog has been reduced to zero, with compliance on new LAC at 68% and improving now that the backlog has been cleared. Review health assessments are at 79%.

19. It is critical that as well as getting the volume of plans produced that they are of a high quality and can demonstrate the difference to children/young people and their outcomes. Work is underway to ensure that quality is monitored regularly.
20. Caseloads are now more manageable, although some areas of Norfolk continue to struggle to attract permanent staff (most notably Kings Lynn), this is recognised and there are further efforts to recruit from abroad. A social work academy is being developed with external input and assistance.
21. In summary, LAC and leaving care services have progressed since July 2015, largely as a result of the team restructure and the fact that both areas now have dedicated teams in each of the six geographical areas. Momentum needs to be maintained.

### **Recommendation 1:**

DfE should hold three-monthly monitoring meetings with Norfolk County Council to ensure that the current plans for Looked After Children and Leaving Care services are maintained.

## **High performing senior managers, pace and focus**

22. The senior team from DCS, through the assistant director level and the six heads of social work are all permanent appointments. The structure came into place in September 2015. This is a welcome development as there had previously been an extended period of interim senior leadership.
23. There is no doubt that the team have commitment to improving children's services and in relative terms the structure and appointments are relatively new and therefore are still 'bedding in'. There are a mixture of those who are stepping up from more junior management positions and more experienced senior staff. Most, but not all are longstanding or relatively longstanding Norfolk employees.
24. The simple fact is that the children's top team (the DCS and his ADs) as well as the social care management team (and the other functional areas) need to become high performing very rapidly. An organic process of development and performance will not drive the process quickly enough; I am concerned about the focus and pace of leadership.

## **Recommendation 2:**

An external coaching, mentoring and management development programme should be introduced rapidly for all senior managers from head of social work up to DCS. This programme will serve two purposes 1. To support the senior staff in a rapid journey of improvement 2. To ensure that DfE has regular sight that progress is being made rapidly.

The coaching and mentoring programme should have clear oversight from DfE, who should agree with Norfolk the detail of the approach and monitor the programme regularly.

## **Data, information and quality assurance**

25. A comprehensive data, information and quality assurance system needs to be completed for Norfolk Children's Services. The issues regarding accurate data and information were illustrated well by the issue of the missing 190 reported to Ofsted at the beginning of the SIF. Improvements have undoubtedly been made, but for the avoidance of doubt, the system needs to perform two main key functions.
26. Firstly, the front line staff and managers need to have clear quality and performance information in order to do their job. This information needs to be available on a team by team basis and needs to make available all the key information on cases, allocations, key PIs (so for instance the PEPS, health assessments and pathway plans). In the safeguarding arena key information on visits, is the child seen alone, case conference and review case conferences etc. This information is a key management tool and needs to be available in 'real time'.
27. Secondly, the core data set needs to be available at both a geographical level for the six areas and at a Norfolk wide level. This should allow for regular performance surgeries that inform front line practice. If this core data set is collected efficiently and presented thoughtfully, all sorts of management groups, committees and groups such as the LSCB could have access to the relevant summary data as necessary.
28. Case audits need to be routine and alongside user feedback give a more rounded picture of performance, so that volume is considered alongside quality. Targeted audits will be key in the areas identified by Ofsted as being problematic (PEPS etc.).



29. Norfolk is likely to embark on the procurement of a new social care IT system, it is critical that the process is driven by a deep understanding of the service needs and not just by the desire to produce summary information at a corporate level. I would advise strongly that Norfolk talk to other LAs who have been through similar procurement processes in the recent past.

### **Recommendation 3:**

DfE should monitor Norfolk's data, information and quality assurance system every three months to ensure momentum and output is maintained.

## **Looking outwards, welcoming challenge, strategic partners**

30. Norfolk children's services have from time to time invested energy and resources into external challenge and peer review and support, but the approaches have been too 'stop and start'. I have already recommended a robust mentoring and coaching approach for the senior managers. In the areas of Looked After Children and Leaving Care, I take the view that these services would benefit from an external strategic partner.

31. Generally Norfolk children's services are too insular and need to develop a three to five year programme in which a continuing journey to good and outstanding is put into place. There are pre-existing devolution discussions with Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, both Councils are rated as 'good' for children's services.

32. Early discussions have taken place with Javed Khan CE at Barnardo's about the possibility of a strategic partnership and colleagues at Norfolk are interested in having a discussion with Barnardo's. Such a partnership could build on some existing work between Norfolk and Barnardo's on child exploitation. An initial meeting is being arranged to explore this option.

### **Recommendation 4:**

Norfolk County Council should ensure that in the medium and longer term partnership and devolution discussions consider a more joined up regional approach to delivery of services for Looked After Children and Leaving Care that go beyond the immediate plans for a strategic partnership with a voluntary agency.

## Conclusion

33. I **do not** consider that there is merit in looking for an external organisation to run Children's Services on behalf of Norfolk at this time. However, history and evidence suggest that Norfolk has struggled to make consolidated progress in children's services over a number of years, failing to move above adequate/requires improvement. Other governance models and approaches have been tried elsewhere, children's trusts in Doncaster and Slough, a private organisation in Sandwell and local authority running another local authority in Hampshire/Isle of Wight and Richmond/Kingston (via a not for profit organisation).
34. Norfolk continue to have significant challenges particularly in the service areas of Looked After Children and Leaving Care, but elsewhere particularly in safeguarding there has been demonstrable progress which is continuing. There is now a permanent team of senior staff in place and the basic structure of services have been organised sensibly and with purpose.
35. The key challenge is how to make further progress with **focus and pace**. My view is that Norfolk will need dedicated support that is focused and directive; this is an alternative to a different organisational or governance model. There is only one chance left to deliver, the basics are in place, but support, challenge and assistance will be required to complete the journey.
36. The recommendations set out in this report are designed to bring about a relatively rapid improvement to 'requires improvement'. The next phase of the journey will require new and innovative approaches and thinking and these need addressing sooner rather than later.

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