

# Inspection of Kent County Council children's services

**Inspection dates:** 3 to 7 November 2025

**Lead inspector:** Steve Lowe, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Children remain at the core of a strong, and often exceptional, service in Kent. Those children that need help and protection benefit from services, which typically results in positive outcomes for them and their families. Children in care, including those who arrive in Kent as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, receive a sensitive, compassionate and equitable service and some outstanding support that makes a positive difference to their lives. Maintaining family connections and creating lifelong links to significant people allows children in care the opportunity for stability and permanence.

Kent is still the main point of arrival for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in England. Experienced practitioners successfully marshal the National Transfer Scheme, with children supported to live safely across the country. Skilful and compassionate work by Kent staff and strong joint working with the police also protect these vulnerable children from increasing levels of harassment and intimidation.

The significant number of children who are in care but are placed in Kent by other local authorities puts pressure on local schools and statutory partners. Senior leaders ensure the same level of service for these children despite the additional pressures

on finance and infrastructure, while maintaining a largely good, or better, quality service for local children. When children leave care, the majority are supported well by personal advisers (PAs). However, a decreasing number of children are in education, employment or training and in suitable accommodation. Staff from statutory partner agencies are engaged to positive effect when children are at risk of exploitation. This is not consistently the case for care leavers, and for many of those in custody, the support they receive does not meet their needs.

Experienced and committed leaders know the needs of children well and how effectively their services are performing. Well-researched and targeted service design continues within the context of a large 2-tier authority. However, the strategic response to care leavers has been less timely. Senior leaders have identified the same areas for improvement as the inspection team, but corporately, the response has been slow.

## What needs to improve?<sup>1</sup>

- The quality, timeliness and consistency of support offered to care leavers. In particular, care leavers who are vulnerable to exploitation and/or are in custody. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The quality and choice of accommodation for care leavers. (outcome 4, national framework)
- How consistently the local authority ensures that social workers have manageable caseloads that allow them to focus time and attention on each child in line with their level of need. (enabler 2, national framework)

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

1. When children are referred to Kent's 'front door' because they need help and protection, they receive the right help at the right time. Decisions at the point of referral are timely and proportionate. Management oversight is appropriate. Senior practitioners and experienced social workers ensure that decisions are well informed and that children's experiences are central to assessment and planning. The focus on early identification of need is strong at this initial phase, leading to targeted support and improved outcomes for children.
2. Children benefit from a continually strengthening early help offer. Most children are supported well by services that are effective in preventing the escalation of risk. Early help assessments are strengths based and consider the whole family, with a growing emphasis on how previous experiences have impacted on parents' ability to bring up their own children. When risks to children increase, effective arrangements increase the level of support and challenge. Similarly, when risks reduce, families are supported to sustain the changes they have made.
3. Children are seen promptly by practitioners, who use appropriate communication tools to ensure that children's views are understood, including those with additional communication needs. The focus on understanding children's lived experiences is a strong feature of practice across the service.
4. Child protection strategy discussions take place promptly when risks escalate. Decisions are informed by relevant historical information and by strong partnership working, resulting in clear actions and timely child protection enquiries. Investigations lead to appropriate protection and support. Whenever possible, the social connections service is used effectively to strengthen safety

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<sup>1</sup> The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

planning and give early thought to care in the extended family as a viable option for children.

5. Officers have a clear understanding of their legal responsibilities in relation to elective home education and children missing education. Strong systems are used effectively to identify children who may be at risk, and an established culture of agencies working together ensures that children's needs are being met, or appropriate actions are taken if they are not.
6. The out-of-hours (OOH) team provides a safe and responsive service to children in urgent need outside normal working hours. Experienced practitioners make prompt, proportionate decisions to safeguard children. The OOH Central Referral Unit responds highly effectively when unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrive in Kent. Supported by an on-call bank of experienced social workers and managers, children are kept safe and made to feel welcome.
7. The response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds has improved since the last inspection. Joint working between social care and district housing offices is more consistent, and children benefit from prompt assessments and clear communication about their rights and options.
8. Most social work assessments are thorough and analytical, providing a clear understanding of children's experiences and needs. The majority of assessments lead to proportionate plans that are specific and measurable. A small number of assessments do not thoroughly identify the impact on children of parental mental ill health or domestic abuse. As a result, the experiences of those children are not fully understood.
9. Leaders have taken some steps to strengthen supervision arrangements, particularly for less-experienced staff. Supervision records demonstrate appropriate management oversight, although frequency and recording are inconsistent for some workers, particularly in teams where caseloads are high. This contributes to minor delays in decision-making for some children. While these delays do not typically alter the eventual outcomes for children, they result in avoidable drift in planning and progress.
10. Children subject to child protection plans benefit from purposeful planning and multi-agency participation. Child protection strategy meetings, conferences and reviews are timely, and child protection plans set out clear actions linked to identified needs and risks. Once established, reviews demonstrate good progress and risks to children reduce.
11. Children benefit from sustained relationships with social workers who know them well. Practitioners demonstrate empathy and persistence, with a strong focus on building trust and maintaining engagement. Visits are purposeful and demonstrate that children are seen alone regularly, although the quality and timeliness of recording are not always consistent.

12. Work with unborn babies and pre-birth assessments is a particular strength. Practitioners engage parents at an early stage, using research-informed tools to assess need and risk and taking full account of family history and current circumstances.
13. Work with disabled children is comprehensive, with assessments that consider family history and current need well. Strong multi-agency working ensures that children's welfare and education needs are fully considered. Children who are nonverbal do not always have their voices fully recorded, and therefore, children's plans are not always reflective of their wishes and feelings.
14. When concerns persist for children who are experiencing chronic neglect or emotional harm, decision-making is not always as decisive as it could be. Children sometimes experience delay before stronger action is taken to protect them. Leaders are aware of this and are using quality assurance activity to reinforce expectations for timely and child-focused practice.
15. Legal planning and pre-proceedings work are managed well. Oversight from senior leaders and legal advisers ensures that decisions to enter care proceedings are timely and proportionate. Letters before proceedings are clear. Strong pre-birth work and effective decision-making support timely permanence planning.
16. Private fostering arrangements are suitable for children. Assessments are timely, and written agreements clearly set out safeguarding responsibilities. Children are seen regularly, and oversight ensures their safety and wellbeing.
17. Children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation receive a well-coordinated response. Practitioners demonstrate a good understanding of risks to children that originate outside the home, and intelligence-sharing across agencies is improving. Consequently, joint working with other agencies, in particular the police, is increasingly effective in disrupting and preventing the exploitation of children by adults.

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

18. The quality of support for children in care has not only been sustained since the last inspection but has been further strengthened. The vast majority of children in care receive a consistently good service. Children keeping or making positive connections is a consistent strand throughout this work.
19. Decisions for children to enter care are made in a timely manner and when it is necessary and in their interests to do so. Children reviewing their records would understand why these decisions were taken for them.
20. The work undertaken by the reception and safe care service from the point unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arrive, through to their moving to other areas via the National Transfer Scheme, is impressive. Highly skilled practitioners and managers very swiftly identify needs, risks and links to family

and friends so that children arriving in the county, often after experiencing significant trauma, can be welcomed and enabled to feel safer very quickly. Solicitors are promptly appointed. Experienced workers ensure access to interpreters, health services and education for children in the reception centres, while being sensitive to trauma and emotional needs.

21. Practitioners demonstrate a strong understanding of safeguarding children who may be at risk of exploitation or of posing a risk to others. When required, concerns are appropriately escalated through multi-agency forums, such as the National Referral Mechanism. Matching is carefully considered, including placement with families as a preferred option for siblings and younger children. When children are awaiting decisions on their asylum status, sensitive planning prepares them for any of the possible outcomes.
22. Children in care build positive relationships with their social workers, who visit them in line with their individual needs. For those children who do not speak English, or who speak English as an additional language, the use of interpreters is routine. Apart from a small number of pathway plans, documents are routinely translated for these children.
23. Children in care have individualised plans. Diversity and difference are acknowledged and explored well. Children are well represented in looked-after reviews, either through their attendance at the meeting, speaking with the independent reviewing officer (IRO) beforehand or by chairing the meeting themselves. IRO oversight is consistent and effective. Most looked-after review minutes and children's plans are detailed and reflect children's needs well with a range of achievable and often aspirational actions.
24. Children leave care and return to their families when it is right and safe to do so. Reunification is carefully planned following updated assessments of risk and parenting capacity. Detailed support for parents and children is put in place early and includes contingency planning.
25. When children cannot live with their parent(s), they are supported to live with family or other people who are important to them when it is safe for this to happen. The positive impact of the kinship care team has significantly increased the number of these arrangements for children. The service responds quickly to requests for emergency kinship assessments, ensuring that children can be placed swiftly with family members whom they know. Parents' and family members' views are sought and considered, often within the family group conference process, and these views are central to planning for children in care.
26. Children in long-term foster care live with carers who meet their needs for the rest of their childhood, giving them a sense of stability and of being loved and cared for.
27. Social workers and leaders understand that it is never acceptable for children to live in accommodation that is unregistered. However, a small number of

children are living in unregistered provision when all other options have been thoroughly explored, and no suitable registered alternatives are available. All decisions to place a child in an unregistered arrangement are authorised by the director of children's services (DCS) and reviewed regularly. Social workers and IROs visit children in unregistered provision with increased frequency. These visits are purposeful, guided by a clear checklist to ensure that children's safety and welfare remain paramount.

28. Children living with family and friends where the assessment is not complete are overseen with the same rigour, with reviews taking place fortnightly. Any delays in assessing these arrangements are only agreed with a clear rationale recorded.
29. Children in care have access to an extensive array of groups and forums to meet each other, engage in fun activities and actively influence how services are run. For example, the MAGIC group, for children with identified special educational needs and/or disabilities, is a highly motivated and articulate group with a clear sense of purpose. Their recent contribution to the corporate parenting panel, through their powerful 'This is Me' video, exemplifies their ambition, confidence and ability to influence change. In another example, a child's feelings about coming into foster care are now helping with recruitment.
30. The majority of children in care have strong, positive relationships with their social workers. These workers demonstrate a deep understanding of the children they support, engaging with warmth and genuine care. They help children make sense of their experiences through age-appropriate direct work, ensuring that each child's story is understood. Social workers take time to explain situations clearly and actively listen to children's views, resulting in well-informed planning that reflects the voices of the children. Children told inspectors about how the IROs are consistent in their lives and advocate on their behalf.
31. Children's health needs are a priority when they come into care. Most children are registered with relevant universal services, such as GPs and dentists, and have access to specialist support, such as child and adolescent mental health services, when necessary.
32. The virtual school demonstrates clear ambition and the qualities of a strong corporate parent. A relational and inclusive culture with schools challenges them to improve inclusion, attendance and the appropriate use of education, health and care plans.
33. Children in care achieve well educationally, comparing positively against both regional and national benchmarks. Strong systems for monitoring attendance ensure that any concerns are identified early and addressed swiftly. Personal education plans provide an equally rigorous framework for highlighting gaps in academic progress and barriers to learning.

34. Children are supported to live in permanent homes as early and as quickly as possible if it is the right plan for them. Senior management oversight of plans for all children with a plan of permanence is palpable, and senior managers know these children's stories. Children are supported to maintain links with people they care about when permanence options are being considered.
35. The possibility of permanence through special guardianship orders, when it is possible and in children's best interests, is appropriately assessed as part of court proceedings to ensure stability for children.
36. Since the last inspection, the fostering service has expanded to meet the needs of children. Now incorporating kinship care, the range of foster carers is increasing. The in-house therapeutic offer for foster carers provides foster carers with space for reflection and practical strategies to care for children more effectively. Foster carers access an extensive range of support groups that provide them with peer support and professional advice when appropriate. Out of hours, foster carers have access to dedicated fostering support that provides them with expertise at times of crisis or when additional support or advice is needed. Without exception, foster carers spoken to by inspectors spoke of the high levels of support they receive from their supervising social workers.
37. The local authority works closely with the regional adoption agency, Adoption Partnership South East, and ensures that there is good-quality recruitment, assessment and support to adopters. Adopters are well informed and supported throughout their adoption journey. Post-adoption support is timely and responsive to individual need.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: requires improvement to be good**

38. Children are primarily prepared for adulthood by social workers and foster carers. However, the transition to PAs often takes place close to, or shortly after, a young person's 18th birthday. For some, this limits the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with their PA and impacts on the quality of support they receive as they enter adulthood. High demand and heavy caseloads mean there is little opportunity to match care leavers to PAs whose skills and approach might best meet their needs.
39. For some young people, when they turn 18 years old, their support is significantly reduced at a time when they have to develop the skills to be independent adults but retain many of the vulnerabilities that were identified when they were a child.
40. Social workers and PAs who have had time to build relationships with young people mostly know them well and speak about them with pride and genuine affection.

41. Care leavers are supported to maintain links with people who are important to them, through the lifelong links service.
42. Care leavers have a strong voice and are actively involved in shaping services. They are well represented by the Children in Care Council, which is routinely consulted on service provision and has direct access to the corporate parenting board. Young people's feedback contributes to service improvements.
43. The support available to care leavers, including those who have experienced significant trauma or have physical health needs, primarily relies on universal services such as GPs and referrals to community mental health teams. PAs signpost young people to these services and provide guidance on accessing support independently online or via helplines. However, in contrast to children in care, there is limited evidence of additional tailored support that addresses the impact of trauma and early life experiences.
44. The local offer for care leavers lacks ambition. PAs have a strong understanding of the local offer, but care leavers often require additional support, which relies on the PA's initiative, persistence and knowledge of local charities or alternative funding sources.
45. Pathway plans, while comprehensive, can be lengthy and less tailored to individual needs and aspirations. Some are thoughtfully developed with the young person, while others are primarily written by the PA and focus more on tasks for the young person rather than a supportive roadmap for achieving success.
46. Former unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a tailored service that helps them navigate asylum applications and settle into their local communities. Their pathway plans are culturally sensitive. They are actively encouraged to participate in celebratory and community activities.
47. Care leavers who are parents are supported well by their PAs, who often go above and beyond to help them develop the skills and confidence needed to be good parents for their children. This includes effective partnership working with health professionals, the children's social worker, the independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA), and housing and benefits agencies.
48. Care leavers report that they do not always feel safe in their homes. In a recent survey by the local authority, 20% said they do not feel safe, and only 63% rated their accommodation positively. Concerns relate to internal issues, such as damp, mould and faulty electrical wiring, as well as external factors, including unsafe neighbours and local environmental risks. Inspectors confirmed the same picture. The quality and range of housing provision has improved little since the last inspection. Housing options are complex due to Kent's 12 district housing authorities, resulting in variability in both the quality and availability of accommodation. Registering care leavers as homeless to secure temporary accommodation when they turn 18 has become custom and

practice and is symptomatic of insufficient preparation time with their PA. Many care leavers must move long distances to access suitable housing and are given limited choice. Senior leaders have introduced a rent guarantor scheme and continued negotiations with housing colleagues to try and resolve these problems, but with insufficient impact.

49. PAs often face barriers to accessing prisons, which prevents them visiting care leavers in custody as often as they need. These, and other care leavers, do not receive adequate support while in custody or on release. Multi-agency risk management or support meetings are often not held prior to discharge. Financial support is often delayed while awaiting benefits, and post-release visits are not always carried out in a timely manner, contributing to a number of young people being recalled to custody shortly after release. Care leavers in custody often receive minimal assistance to participate in education or work while detained, increasing the risk of reoffending.
50. For many care leavers, professionals lack the necessary curiosity regarding potential exploitation, with little sense of urgency and minimal use of assessment tools to evaluate risk. In July 2025, PAs reported feeling that they are managing safeguarding concerns on their own, which has not changed. Additionally, processes, such as the multi-agency forum for mapping places and spaces of concern for children in care, are not routinely used for care leavers, and important intelligence about young people's histories and potential risks is not consistently shared with PAs.
51. The number of care leavers aged 18 to 21 in employment, training or education is lower than in similar local authorities, due in large part to the number of young people with undecided immigration status. In response, care leavers who are able to access education, employment and training are supported by Aspirations Workers, who provide tailored advice and practical assistance and who have successfully supported work placements that have led to permanent employment. A number of care leavers have also completed apprenticeships offered by the council. However, this offer has not been extended to other areas of the local authority or district councils. For care leavers whose immigration status is undecided, securing education, employment or training is extremely problematic, but an alternative offer from their corporate parents is poor.

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

52. Experienced senior leaders in Kent continue to face unique circumstances that add additional pressure to the challenge of providing the services that they are required to deliver. Apart from the size and scale of the county, the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in Kent has continued to rise since the last inspection. Also, there are over 1,200 children in care who live in Kent who were placed from elsewhere in the country. Senior leaders have risen to the challenge, and these children are all clearly treated as vulnerable children

first. The reception for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is exceptional; in challenging circumstances it continues to be sensitive, caring and highly effective. The local authority proactively engages with and, when appropriate, challenges both government departments and other local authorities to help with these pressures.

53. In the context of a change of political administration and imminent local government reform, senior leaders have maintained, or further strengthened, the quality and effectiveness of the majority of services since the last inspection. For example, 16- to 17-year-old homeless children now receive a more streamlined and sympathetic response most of the time, kinship care is increasing, fostering recruitment remains steady and family hubs are having an increased impact.
54. A stable and highly skilled DCS and senior leadership team have a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the services provided to children and young people. This understanding is supported by the effective use of performance information and analytics, which helps to predict and plan for future trends.
55. Strategic partnerships with both police and health agencies are productive and child centred. For care leavers, this commitment and strategic thinking is weaker and ongoing problems with engaging the 12 district housing authorities has made it harder to ensure appropriate and safe housing for these vulnerable young people. The response to care leavers who are at risk of exploitation is markedly weaker than the highly effective response for children. Senior leaders acknowledge that this could be strengthened and have a task and finish group in place to find a solution, but it is still in its early stages.
56. At the front door, and for children up until they are 18, partnership working with health and police is highly effective. For care leavers, this support is weaker, and the wider local and business community has not been as engaged as it could be in the work of corporate parenting.
57. Performance information and data analysis, both locally and countywide, are used well by inquisitive leaders. Quality assurance is based on a sophisticated, reflective approach. Auditing, including thematic and multi-agency reflection, is one part of a bigger and well-embedded system that is used very effectively to improve practice.
58. Participation remains exceptionally strong with the expansion of the team to include care-experienced young people as ambassadors. The range of activities and opportunities for children of all ages and abilities is impressive. Through surveys, arts, video, written testimony and representation at key strategic meetings, children inform and influence at all levels of the organisation. Young people participate fully in the corporate parenting committee and have a strong voice, highlighting enduring problems with the availability and quality of housing and too many changes of key professionals in their lives.

59. Workforce development, training and career pathways are welcomed by staff, and they are largely choosing to remain because of the quality of support and training that they receive. This includes retaining staff who have qualified in Kent and building the workforce of alternatively qualified staff to support the ongoing implementation of social care reforms. However, a significant part of the workforce still has caseloads that are too high, with gaps in supervision. This has a direct impact on addressing the stubborn and perennial issues of cyclical abuse and long-term neglect. Despite these pressures, staff speak very highly about the support they get from their own and other managers. They enjoy working for Kent and embrace the unique challenges that it brings.

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