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Dear Mr Purbrick

**Focused visit to Cambridgeshire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Cambridgeshire children's services on 9 and 10 June 2026. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Vickie Brown.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, which included a specific focus on:

- the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care
- the experiences and progress of children living in unregistered children's homes

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

## Headline findings

Most children in care continue to thrive in stable, supportive and caring homes. With the growth of kinship care, more children now benefit from living in homes which are well matched to meet their identity and needs. Additionally, more children now benefit from leaving care with their legal permanence secured through special guardianship orders. This is a significant improvement over two years.

Since the last inspection in March 2024, there has been an improvement in the stability of the workforce at every level. This is enabling social work practice to develop and for workloads to decrease so that social workers have the opportunity to improve children's experiences. Some areas of practice identified at the last inspection remain in need of development, in particular the need for sufficient accommodation to meet children's needs. Greater strategic oversight is required to improve the quality assurance of practice, including through supervision and the reviewing of children's case records so that they reflect the important decisions made about children's lives.

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

- The sufficiency of accommodation to meet the needs of children in care in Cambridgeshire. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The quality and consistency of children's case records to reflect decision-making and children's journeys through care. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The quality and effectiveness of supervision in progressing children's plans. (outcome 4, national framework)
- The quality and effectiveness of quality assurance activities to implement learning and develop social work practice. (enabler 2, national framework)

**Main findings**

Most children in care in Cambridgeshire live in stable and caring homes. Many have secured permanence through appropriate matching to their foster carers and are thriving. Social workers explore opportunities for children to remain living within their family network when they cannot safely remain with their parents. This has resulted in a significant increase in the number of children living with kinship foster carers. Consequently, children are helped to maintain their identity and often to remain in their community.

Social workers ensure that children live with their sisters and brothers whenever possible. However, sufficiency challenges mean this is not always possible. Family time is well supported in line with children's wishes and needs. Social workers undertake effective risk assessments to ensure this is safe for children. Family time is arranged carefully to be as natural as possible, with support from carers and social workers.

Few children benefit from comprehensive assessments to inform their plans. As a result, some children do not move to the home which best meets their needs. Some children's plans are not sufficiently detailed, and actions are not always clear, child focused or timebound. This inconsistent quality results in a lack of timely action for some children in having their needs met or permanency plans progressed. For a minority of children, their plans are detailed and timebound, which is effective in ensuring that those children's needs are met.

Children are visited regularly and in line with their specific needs. Social workers know their children well and, as a result, children are able to talk about their wishes and feelings and about what is difficult for them. Some social workers write sensitively to children about the visits which will help children should they read their

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

records now or in the future to understand how they have been supported. Some children benefit from the support of an advocate, which ensures their views are well represented in meetings.

Children's identity and culture are promoted with relevant festivals celebrated and religious observance promoted. Carers ensure that children can enjoy hobbies and sport. Some children benefit from having holidays abroad, which broadens their experiences and creates positive memories.

Most social workers do not complete life-story work early enough to capture key moments in children's lives. The lack of clear recording of significant events and decision-making in an accessible way on children's records does not support this process. Consequently, many children do not have the opportunity of understanding their journey through care in a way that meets their needs.

Social workers and carers are alert to risks outside the home for children in care. Most social workers take time to build trusting relationships with children to help understand their experiences of exploitation. Specialist risk assessments and panels support an effective multi-agency response and intervention being put in place to reduce risk and support children therapeutically.

Children's physical and emotional health needs are well met. Social workers and carers understand their individual needs and ensure that children receive the right support in having their needs met. Most children who need the child and adolescent mental health service are able to access intervention, including when they are living outside of Cambridgeshire.

Most children attend school, college or alternative provision and make suitable progress. Regular network meetings take place with carers, schools, the virtual school and social workers to support children progress in their education. Personal education plans are used effectively for children in care to provide the support or education they need, for example laptops, one-to-one teaching assistant support or additional tutoring in subjects.

Children benefit from regular reviews of their care, which are well attended by children, families and professionals. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) ensure that children's voices inform plans and decisions about their lives. They visit children where they are living to understand their views and monitor the progress of their plans between reviews. Some IROs escalate concerns through the case alert process when there is delay in their needs being met or plans being progressed. However, this is not consistently effective.

The strategic and management oversight of permanence planning has improved since the last inspection, with more children now living in secure long-term homes.

However, the local authority recognises that changes are needed to improve the effectiveness of their monitoring arrangements to include all children in care.

Many more children now have their permanence secured through special guardianship orders than at the last inspection. This provides children with stability and security within kinship care or with their long-term foster carers. A focus on supporting carers to consider special guardianship, alongside the introduction of a no detriment policy, has led to this significant increase. This increase in special guardianship assessments has led to delays for carers being assessed. Senior leaders recognised this and have appointed additional social workers so that prospective special guardians no longer need to wait for assessment.

Many children in Cambridgeshire are settled and living with foster carers with whom they have been matched. Senior leadership and IRO oversight and approval for matching children with long-term carers provide clear accountability. As a result, children benefit from the security of knowing they can remain living with their carers throughout their childhood.

Few children in care return to live with their parents. The local authority recognises that greater strategic oversight of all children's plans is required, and there are plans to strengthen existing permanency tracking so more children can secure long-term stability. Recent assessments to inform this decision are detailed and consider the sustained change in parental capacity to meet the child's needs. This results in appropriate support being offered to families during this transition. When children remain in these arrangements, there is delay for some in having their care orders discharged. This creates uncertainty for children and families and children who remain subject to social care intervention when it is not required.

A small number of children live in unregistered children's homes. These arrangements are only used when all other options are exhausted, with senior leaders maintaining strong oversight. Some of the necessary detail about children's day-to-day experiences and care is not recorded within risk assessments. The progress of children living in unregistered children's homes is tracked in weekly meetings chaired by senior leaders. Children's case records do not always reflect senior leaders' detailed decision-making and oversight of these vulnerable children. This is not helpful for practitioners, managers, leaders or the child should they read their records to understand how important decisions have been made about their lives. The director of children's services (DCS) undertook to remedy this during the inspection.

Social workers visit children living in unregistered children's homes frequently to monitor their safety and wellbeing and maintain relationships with children. Social workers challenge those caring for children to implement strategies to improve children's experiences. This is not consistently effective, and providers do not always implement the necessary changes. There remain safeguarding concerns for a few of

these children, which the DCS is sighted on and is working to address. Although more recently the length of time children live in these homes has reduced, there remains a core group of children who have lived in these homes for many months, reflecting the sufficiency challenges.

When children are unable to live safely within their family, permanence is secured through adoption in a timely way. Effective use is made of activity days and campaigns to find suitable adopters. There is a commitment to keep brothers and sisters together whenever possible. When adoption decisions are reversed, the rationale for this decision is not clearly reflected in children's records. This does not help children understand how this significant decision was made. Adopters seeking adoption support are experiencing delays in being assessed. However, social work support is provided to families in the interim.

Since the last inspection in 2024, the DCS has established a stable senior leadership team, which is helping to drive forward the improvement plan and begin to introduce the children's social care reforms. There has been considerable improvement in the stability of the workforce, with more permanent staff at all levels and reduced workloads for social workers. This has a positive impact in improving consistent relationships with children in care and in social work practice.

Sufficiency of homes for children was an area that required improvement at the last inspection. Senior leaders have responded to this by increasing the number of foster carers through their sufficiency strategy, including kinship foster carers. Senior leaders have strengthened the offer for special guardians, which has led to an increase in the numbers of children who achieve permanence through special guardianship orders. However, there is a lack of progress in developing enough homes to reflect the complex needs of children in care in Cambridgeshire. There are plans in place to address this, but they are not yet having an impact on children's experiences.

A variety of tools are used to quality assure social work practice, including audits of children's case records. Inconsistent consultation with children, parents and carers during audits limits the deeper learning opportunities which this valuable feedback provides. The audits have an appropriate focus on strengths and areas for development. Actions are set to improve practice, although those are not consistently completed. For children in care, the effectiveness of the quality assurance process in helping leaders understand the quality of practice and in developing a strong learning loop is limited. Senior leaders had already recognised this and have plans to increase the capacity of the quality assurance team to address this.

Throughout children's case records, there is a thread of a lack of recording regarding key decisions about children's lives. This is important for accountability, management

oversight and, crucially, in helping the child now or in the future to understand their journey through care.

Social workers enjoy working in Cambridgeshire. They speak with pride and care about the children they are working with and show resilience in supporting them through childhood.

Social workers describe a visible senior leadership team whose members attend their development days, 'walk the floor' and are approachable. Social workers value the training offer and feel that this is directly improving their social work practice.

The quality and effectiveness of supervision remain inconsistent in supporting the progress of children's plans. For some children, there is careful, detailed reflection on what needs to happen to progress their plans and to keep them safe. For other children, there is a lack of challenge when tasks are not completed and of timebound actions; this has an adverse impact on children's plans progressing.

Group supervision between professionals is a strength. It is particularly useful and effective where a number of social workers are involved in working with large family groups.

The majority of social workers are now permanent across the local authority. Social workers in the children in care teams have manageable workloads. Those who have been working for the local authority for many years reflect on how this is helping them to achieve the right outcomes for children.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
His Majesty's Inspector