



**care**  
inspectorate

# Inspection of the leadership of children's social work services in the City of Edinburgh Council

November 2025



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## About this inspection

### Introduction

The Care Inspectorate's vision is that everyone experiences safe, high-quality care that meets their needs, rights and choices. Our mission is to provide public assurance about the quality of social work and social care, promote innovation and drive continuous improvement.

### Inspection focus

The Care Inspectorate was requested to undertake an inspection by the Scottish Government's Minister for Children and Young People. The focus of this inspection was to provide independent scrutiny and assurance of the leadership of children's social work services in the City of Edinburgh. This single agency inspection gathered and considered evidence in relation to three key lines of enquiry.

1. The extent to which senior leaders had effective and robust oversight of improvement across children's social work services.
2. The extent to which senior leaders worked together to use performance management data and quality assurance activity to assure themselves of the quality of performance across children's social work services.
3. The extent to which senior leaders directed, promoted and demonstrated an effective, safe and inclusive culture in which staff were supported.

From these, we determined the extent to which senior leaders demonstrated the capacity for continued improvement which ensured robust and safe service delivery.

### Inspection approach and methodology

The request to inspect the leadership of children's social work services followed a number of highly publicised events in children's services in Edinburgh over several years, many of which were, or remain, active in the public domain. As a result of these, leaders and staff across the service had experienced a very challenging environment in which to ensure children, young people and families were safe and protected. Leadership under these circumstances was pivotal to improvement.

The importance of effective leadership in local authorities' children's social work services cannot be underestimated. There are clear links between staff's confidence in strategic leadership, systematic approaches to quality assurance and improved outcomes for children and young people<sup>1</sup>. Strong and sustained leadership of practice is a critical aspect of leadership of strengths-based ways of working<sup>2</sup>.

To ensure a consistent and **trauma-informed** approach to inspecting the leadership of children's social work services in the City of Edinburgh, we used the [quality framework for children and young people in need of care and protection](#) (2022).

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<sup>1</sup> [Review of findings from the joint inspection programme 2021 – 2025.pdf](#)

<sup>2</sup> Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2022.

Inspectors collected and reviewed evidence against the quality indicators in the framework to support the three key lines of enquiry.

The inspection took place between August and October 2025 and involved the below activities.

- We reviewed internal Care Inspectorate data and intelligence.
- We analysed almost 400 documents. These included a range of strategic, operational and improvement plans, reports, consultations, minutes and performance management data covering all aspects of children's social work services.
- We observed, and read papers relating to, relevant committees webcast over the last year. These included the Education, Children and Families Committee; the Governance, Risk and Best Value Committee and the Council-wide Committee.
- We undertook a survey of children's social work services' frontline staff and team managers. We received 353 completed returns, representing 64% of that workforce.
- We met with 65 senior leaders, **elected members** and managers of children's social work services in a series of interviews and focus groups. We saw some people more than once across different groups or individual interviews.

This gave us a broad range of information from which to analyse evidence in relation to each key line of enquiry.

## **Acknowledgements**

We acknowledge that the inspection took place at the same time as a service review consultation was taking place within children's social work services.

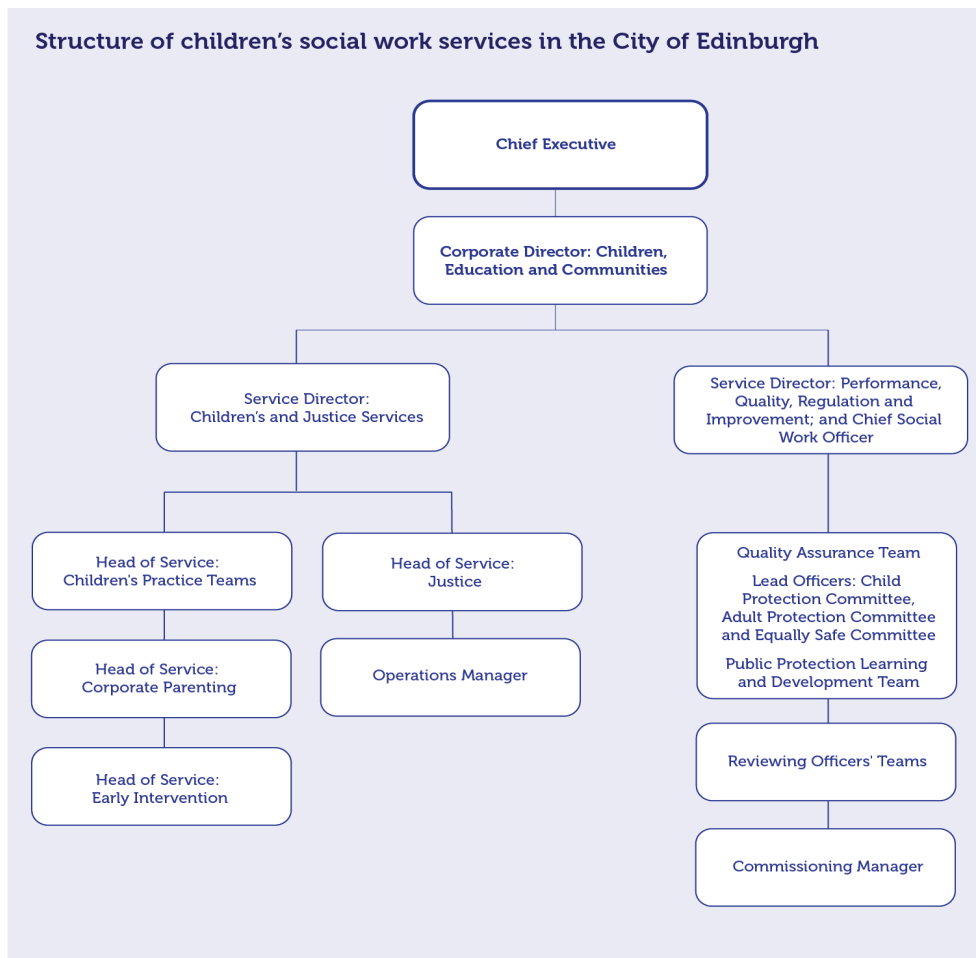
Our inspection focus was limited to providing independent assurance of how well children's social work services were directed, led and assured.

We did not gather evidence of the effectiveness of these services in supporting children and families who used services. We cannot, therefore, give comment on how well the needs of children, young people and families were addressed.

The key messages in this report represent a balance of views expressed by the staff we heard from directly, via the survey or resulting from inspection activities. We acknowledge, therefore, that this report may not be representative of the views of every staff member in the City of Edinburgh's children's social work services.

We appreciate the time people took to speak with inspectors and we are grateful to everyone we met with, and heard from, in providing us with their views.

## Structure of children’s social work services



Children’s social work services were in the final stages of a re-design at the time of the inspection. In the existing Children, Education and Justice Directorate, a Corporate Director of Children, Education and Communities, reporting to the Council Chief Executive, was responsible for the delivery of children’s social work services. The Corporate Director was supported by two service directors and three heads of service. Service Director 1 held the remit for operational practice, managing four heads of service. Service Director 2 held the remit for the management of performance, quality, regulation and improvement; and also acted as the **chief social work officer**, the remit of which included leadership of the social work profession across children’s, adults’ and justice services. The remits of the three heads of service were respectively: management of the children’s practice teams, corporate parenting and early intervention. Collectively, this was the senior leadership team for children’s social work services. A workforce of approximately 550 staff worked across children’s social work services teams within this structure.

Where we say ‘senior leaders’ in this report, we refer collectively to these roles unless specified otherwise. Where we say ‘staff’ in this report, we refer to the children’s social work service staff and managers outwith the senior leadership team, unless specified otherwise.

## Key messages

1. A new senior leadership team had formed in a relatively short period of time. Collectively, they had implemented promising improvements in governance structures and quality assurance frameworks to better understand the quality of practice. This had also contributed towards some positive improvements for children and young people.
2. A growing culture of trust and respect was experienced within and across operational teams. Staff felt valued by their immediate line managers and colleagues across children's and wider social work services. Staff benefitted from regular and tailored supervision which they said increased their confidence.
3. Overall, staff were not confident in the cohesion of senior leadership and did not feel there was an environment of trust or a culture in which they could meaningfully engage with senior leaders. Despite a range of methods being used by senior leaders to communicate with staff and hear their views, the intended messages had not always been effectively delivered or heard by staff. As a result, senior leaders did not benefit from the support of, or constructive challenge from, staff.
4. The strategic planning landscape was complex and links with quality assurance activity were not explicit or understood by staff. This made it harder for staff to understand how their work contributed to co-ordinated and shared priorities and practice improvements.
5. Governance arrangements between Council committees and senior officers were not as effective as they could have been at driving improvements across children's social work services.
6. Developments across the service had been fast paced but had not always provided the assurance leaders required. Senior leaders remained equivocal about the quality of practice and the safety and protection experienced by children and young people. Staff and leaders now recognised a period of consolidation was required to assess learning and inform further improvement activity.

## **Key line of enquiry 1: The extent to which senior leaders have effective and robust oversight of improvement across children's social work services.**

### **Governance arrangements**

In the last two to three years, senior leaders had worked hard to put in place frameworks which would enable them to maintain robust oversight of improvement across children's social work services. There were structures in place at team, service, directorate and Council level to support internal scrutiny and assurance. Leaders had been focused on developing a coherent understanding of children's social work services. This had led to a busy period of development at a strategic planning and governance level to create the necessary frameworks.

There were a number of positive improvements in governance arrangements. A joint strategic needs assessment (2025) evidenced how services were commissioned based on population needs and this formed the basis of planning. A children's services commissioning framework had been in place since April 2025, focussed on outcomes and the experiences of the child and this set clear standards for service providers. Senior leaders maintained oversight of commissioning. At an operational level, a Resources Authorisation Review Group (RARG) was held weekly to support decision making through this framework. Staff were confident it was effective in ensuring proposed care and support was tailored to the needs of individual children and young people. A specific Edges of Care team had been created to support children and young people at risk of requiring statutory intervention. There was improved adherence to guidelines which supported the matching of children to appropriate care placements. Altogether, the commissioning framework, RARG, Edges of Care team and the adherence to matching guidelines had contributed to a reduction in placement breakdowns.

Service risks were managed via risk registers for each aspect of the children's social work service. Common risks, such as staff recruitment and retention, or budgetary pressures, were held on rolling risk logs to ensure a continued focus on this area of risk. The commissioning framework and risk registers were regularly shared with senior leaders to ensure oversight of the impact of these on service delivery. Although mitigations were in place, there was little evidence of how mitigating actions further reduced risk.

### **Strategic planning**

One shared vision was integrated across all strategic plans, that "Edinburgh's children and young people enjoy their childhood and achieve their potential". The Edinburgh Children's Partnership was the main forum for the governance of multi-agency children's services but its work was not well known among social work children's services staff we spoke with. Partnership members said more needed to be done to support all multi-agency staff to develop multi-agency working and to support staff to understand the link between their work and that of strategic planning groups.

The six main strategic plans governing the work of children's services demonstrated a read-across and each plan was regularly reviewed via its specific governance route. However, each had different measures and the collective aims and actions presented a challenge for prioritisation. Plans were not co-ordinated in one pathway by senior leaders. Although strategic plans were multi-agency, staff we spoke to within children's social work services were not always clear about which plan they were working to. This was a challenge for staff in understanding how their work with individual children and young people aligned to strategic priorities and overarching service improvement for all children and young people. There remained risks that plans were developed without the benefit of understanding the outcomes from others. Just over half of staff said that strategic planning groups drove practice.

Staff believed that much of the authority for strategic and operational decision making had rested at the corporate director's level while governance arrangements were being developed. This was felt to be necessary while the senior leadership team had been forming. However, this same period had been characterised by staff perceptions of fragmented relationships at service director level. Much of the decision making was felt by staff to have remained with the corporate director and within a centralised decision making model. Staff told us that there was limited delegation of leadership across all levels, which would have enabled senior leaders to focus on addressing strategic priorities while simultaneously empowering staff and forging trusting relationships within which leaders could affect change.

The corporate director was visible in children's houses and initiated regular virtual events to communicate with staff. Despite this and other various forms of communication from senior leaders, many staff did not believe the overarching vision was clear or communicated to support the delivery of children's social work services. Senior leaders, although disappointed, acknowledged more was needed to simplify the landscape of strategic planning and improve communication to, and from, staff. Many staff we spoke with had not seen the professional leadership of social work being driven across children's services. Less than half of staff responding to our survey said that leaders promoted and role modelled social work values. Staff told us the chief social work officer functions<sup>3</sup> needed to be more visible. To address capacity for the role across all social work services and in representation at other relevant fora, a new post was proposed at the time of the inspection – that of service director with a remit for prevention services. Together with the principal social work officer for adults' services, this was hoped to go some way to free up the chief social work officer role to focus more on children's social work services. The proposed role remained in the planning stage at the time of inspection.

Senior managers met regularly in a variety of different governance fora. Some leaders said that co-location had supported cross service working and helped build relationships, including regular visibility of the chief executive. Monthly and weekly meetings of social work senior leaders supported scrutiny of service performance, provision and risk. The corporate director had led a programme of work entitled

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<sup>3</sup> 'Undertaking the role of the chief social work officer: sharing knowledge from practice 2016', Social Work Scotland and Care Inspectorate (2017)



'doing the basics beautifully'. This programme of work to promote foundational areas of social work practice, such as assessment, was reported by some senior leaders to be helping them to develop confidence in practice across the service.

The **child protection committee** (CPC) reported regularly to the **chief officers group for public protection** (COGPP). The independent chair and lead officer of the CPC had both been in post just over one year and, in that time, had made strenuous efforts to develop a governance framework and associated reporting arrangements for child protection matters. This included an analysis of performance across the multi-agency elements of child protection, the outcomes of learning reviews, learning and development opportunities and policy development. These were all regularly reported to the COGPP who directed further single and multi-agency work.

Positively, around three quarters of staff in our survey said they understood their leadership structures. Long term absence at service director level had led to interim arrangements, causing uncertainty for staff. Staff expressed a lack of clarity regarding the permanent arrangement for these roles and the situation meant some aspects of planning had been delayed. External consultants had been commissioned most recently to support senior leaders in their responsibilities to the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry. Given the nature of this work, there were tight requirements in relation to confidentiality. Many staff told us the consultants' remits had not been communicated effectively. Staff remained unclear and anxious about the reach of the consultants' current roles. Learning from the work of the consultants was not felt by staff to have been widely shared and this compounded the anxiety of many staff around these roles.

## **Oversight of performance**

The performance of children's services was reported regularly across a variety of Council committees. As reported previously by Audit Scotland<sup>4</sup>, committee agendas were lengthy, with many associated papers, and this placed strain on both **officers** and elected members and necessitated some reports to be carried over to additional committee meetings. Within busy agendas, children's services reports were less prominent than other agenda items, for example, education-related papers. The children's services improvement plan, an item for noting at committee, had received less debate than other agenda items proposed for specific discussion and decision. There was opportunity for discussion and questioning by elected members in pre-committee planning meetings. However, not all elected members took this opportunity, with some acknowledging that reports requiring a decision inevitably took priority.

Some elected members and council officers expressed concern at what they described as a lack of clarity in the boundaries between their respective roles. For some, the line between the discharging of responsibilities in relation to strategic policy decision making and the operational delivery of children's services had become blurred. There were, at times, evident tensions between some officers and

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<sup>4</sup> The City of Edinburgh Council 2023/24 Annual Audit Report (Audit Scotland)

elected members as a result of this. In situations where elected members represented the views of constituents on emotive or politically sensitive topics, questioning during public committees was sometimes experienced by both elected members and officers as impassioned. There were sometimes delays in elected members receiving additional information requested from officers which had led to delays in officers' capacity to deliver on policy decisions and meet operational demands. Elected members had received briefings on some children's services-related topics, however, did not always feel knowledgeable about some more detailed themes which they needed to better undertake their scrutiny role in relation to children's social work services. Both elected members and officers expressed a will to work better together to build the relationships necessary for each to undertake their unique respective functions.

The children's social work service was in the final stages of a redesign at the time of inspection. With no additional budget, the redesign was focussed on redistribution of resource and greater equity in workload. Under a quarter of staff responding to our survey said that leaders had ensured that sufficient resources were in place to meet the needs of children and young people using services. Senior leaders anticipated that the redesign of the children's social work service was an opportunity to strengthen resourcing and alignment of resources to areas of greatest need. A process for staff consultation had taken place and presentations had been given by senior leaders across different fora to a wide range of staff. While many staff welcomed the redesign and the opportunity to better align resources to need, there were some staff who did not feel listened to within this process.

## **Learning**

In our survey, under half of staff said that leaders communicated regularly with staff at all levels. Only a third felt that when they did, this communication helped them better understand the work of wider children's social work services. Senior leaders acknowledged that a communication strategy would better support them to communicate widely, and in a co-ordinated way, to ensure all staff effectively heard the messages they wished to give.

The fast pace of activity in the last two years was commented on by staff, leaders and elected members alike. The significant amount of work undertaken by senior leaders, in a relatively short period of time, was acknowledged as necessary by almost everyone we spoke with. Most said it was important to now have a period of consolidation and learning. Leaders had more to do to win the hearts and minds of staff across children's social work services who had experienced tumultuous, traumatic and challenging times in recent years.

## **Key line of enquiry 2: The extent to which senior leaders work together to use performance management data and quality assurance activity to assure themselves of the quality of performance across children's social work services.**

### **Quality assurance and audit**

Senior leaders had directed a significant amount of activity in the last two to three years to assure themselves of the quality of performance across children's social work services.

Initially, a team of external consultants had been brought in to lead on audit activity, but this had become the responsibility of the internal quality assurance and compliance (QA) team in the last two years. This team now supported all aspects of quality assurance of social work services, including children's services. The work of the QA team had been crucial in supporting senior leaders to have a level of oversight of practice. Staff and leaders welcomed the efforts of this team in supporting them to collate, understand and use data to support their work.

An annual audit plan was submitted by the QA team and approved by senior leaders. A quality assurance and practice learning framework outlined the purpose, process and timescale of the different types of audit to be undertaken. There was planned regular audit activity, some of which had included team managers, underpinned by a clear framework, tracking mechanisms and a timeline for completion. A number of audits of practice had taken place in the last two to three years including audits of the records of children and young people on the edge of child protection, children in care placements, **interagency referral discussions** (IRDs) and transitions for young people affected by disability. Each audit resulted in a report with clear recommendations and some had an associated action plan. It was not always recorded who was taking forward the actions arising from these audits or how outcomes were co-ordinated at a senior leadership level. For example, one overarching QA data gathering tool combined learning from audits, learning reviews, significant occurrence notifications and advocacy services. Although regularly monitored at senior management performance meetings, the ways in which this tool was being used to demonstrate a difference in practice were not always explicitly recorded.

### **Performance reporting**

Clear and well established processes supported data collection. Monthly data cleansing reports provided an overview of service recording. Themes were identified and team managers were responsible for actions for their own teams. Monthly performance reports to heads of service provided a regular overview of performance against agreed performance indicators. Annual reports for both data cleansing and performance indicators were also available to senior leaders. Senior management performance meetings were held regularly and reviewed performance action trackers. These incorporated a wide range of data and performance reporting, including complaints against children's services. In these, audit outcomes were regularly and routinely reported to senior leaders and recommendations for

improvement were recorded and fed back to heads of service who cascaded this to team managers. Further clarity was needed for staff about how the audit cycle reflected the priorities from strategic plans.

### **Staff experience of quality assurance**

Staff told us their experiences of quality assurance were improving. Over three quarters of staff with management responsibilities told us they received performance and quality improvement information to support their management role. Almost all told us they were asked to undertake audit or other quality assurance activities, although less than a quarter said they had been trained in this. The majority of staff undertaking audit were provided with the findings, however, less than half were confident in using quality assurance data to drive improvement.

Most managers we heard from agreed that the performance and quality improvement information they received helped them in their management role. This supported transparency and inclusion. Monitoring arrangements were in place in relation to the outcomes of whistleblowing notifications, significant occurrence notifications and complaints outcomes. Wider Council systems provided access to information regarding workforce recruitment and retention. Learning conversations were taking place with staff involved in audits and children's records were updated to reflect findings. Staff reported that, at times, the focus of audit on practice teams had felt relentless. The continued requests for additional data was experienced as a lack of confidence in the assurance given through this work.

### **Quality assurance within multi agency groups**

The establishment of the multi-agency quality assurance (MAQA) meeting to focus on the improvement of residential services was a prompt response in 2022 following recommendations from a significant case review and subsequent investigation. Positively, this meeting included representation from advocacy services, reflecting lived experiences within this quality assurance forum. The MAQA meeting was chaired by the service director to which it reported, meaning there was no independent oversight of the meeting's actions or recommendations. The terms of reference did not specify a clear, formal reporting of progress from MAQA to senior leadership which could have mitigated the chair's capacity to provide independent support or challenge. They had also not been reviewed in timescale, meaning that the group's purpose was not reviewed as its improvement work developed. There were also significant gaps between some MAQA meetings which impacted on the continuity of decision making and, ultimately, on the level of scrutiny applied to performance from this forum.

Children's social work services were contributing to multi-agency assurance mechanisms, for example, through the child protection audit work and the national minimum data set reviewed by the child protection committee. The approach to multi-agency learning reviews had been strengthened and there was evidence of this, and learning from other reviews, supporting improvement in some areas of practice. There was less awareness among team managers about the findings from

learning, or other, reviews. However, some feedback sessions were taking place. Over half of staff said the findings from reviews were shared with them.

### **Quality assurance for improvement**

Work had been undertaken to monitor and improve the quality of practice across children's social work services. Practice standards had been designed with staff and we heard that the clarity they now provided was supporting practice. Almost all staff told us they knew what standards of practice were expected of them. While teams had their own ways of tracking progress in relation to individual children and young people, the recording of this was reported by staff to be inconsistent across teams. This impacted on the ability of senior leaders to consistently co-ordinate the tracking of progress in relation to outcomes for children and young people across social work services.

A range of data was being collated but there was variability in the extent to which this supported meaningful understanding of service performance and experience. The quality assurance arrangements were not yet contributing as fully as they might to overall service evaluation. Just over half of managers who completed our survey agreed that evaluation of the impact of services for children and young people had led to service improvement. Less than half agreed that, where strategic changes to services had been made, they had led to improvements in outcomes for children and young people.

Despite this range of activity to improve assurance arrangements, this was not yet reflected in the overall confidence of senior leaders. While some progress had been made, regular quality assurance activity was not yet consistently resulting in improved service performance leading to better outcomes for children and young people. For example, we saw audits with repeat recommendations that made it difficult to always understand what progress was being made.

Just over half of respondents to our staff survey said that children's social work services were person-led, safe and effective or that processes enabled them to deliver interventions which resulted in good outcomes for children and young people. Despite this, the majority said that the wellbeing of children and young people was improving and that children and young people were safe and protected. This suggested that, while staff were not confident in processes, they were more confident in their own practice. While senior leaders acknowledged that children and young people were safer than in previous years, particularly in residential care services, they remained less assured than staff.

### **Contribution to internal audit**

Not all staff we spoke with were clear about the interface between the Council wide internal audit team and the children's services QA team or, therefore, the status of recommendations arising from internal audit. Not all actions recorded by internal audit reports to the Children, Education and Justice Directorate were recorded in the children's services improvement, or other strategic, plan.

Children's services reported four key performance indicators as part of wider Council internal audit functions. For example, these included the numbers of children and young people subject to child protection or '**looked after**' arrangements. The Council's internal audit team reported that there were delays in senior leaders responding to confirm aspects of the audit plan, further delaying aspects of assurance work. Senior social work leaders decided they would include audit updates as part of the existing improvement plan reporting cycle to committee. Given the acknowledged challenges in elected members' capacity to effectively scrutinise all papers for noting, it was not possible to gauge the extent to which outcomes arising from audit practice could be effectively and consistently measured through this route.

## **Work in progress**

The current information system impacted what could be collected and as a result, not all data was accepted by senior leaders as accurate or up-to-date. One example was the number of data measures being used to ascertain whether children were being seen at a frequency commensurate with both their needs and with practice standards. While a combination of system and audit information was being used to interrogate data, team managers still had to manually check extracted information in order to provide an explanation behind the data. Positively, senior leaders had driven the procurement of a new IT system due in 2026 which, it was hoped, would support better data collation and analysis and give greater control to team managers about what was measured.

An engagement and participation strategy was not planned until March 2026, however, some promising developments had been undertaken to collect data to better understand the experiences of stakeholders, including children and young people. Senior leaders reflected that there was more to do. There were examples of surveys and Quick Response (QR) codes being used to elicit feedback from children and young people. While the overall returns rate showed an improving picture and results were positive, the numbers of returns were low for each service. This made it difficult for the service to have an overall understanding of children's and young people's experiences. Demonstrating evidence about how the data gained from children, young people and their families improved or developed services remained an ongoing development.

There was evidence of self-assessment in some areas of practice. Senior leaders recognised that self-evaluation needed to be strengthened. A key agreed action following the redesign was for heads of service to undertake evaluations of their own service areas using an approach based on learning from recent experiences of involvement in the Care Inspectorate's national review of Justice Social Work<sup>5</sup>.

The particular effort directed at quality assurance and performance was impressive and had initially been necessary to ensure senior leaders had effective oversight of the range of areas of practice in order to be assured of the safety of children and young people. However, there was a prevailing feeling among staff, including senior

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<sup>5</sup> Justice Social Work: self evaluation of performance, quality and outcomes – a national review (Care Inspectorate, 2025)

leaders, that the gathering of data now needed to move beyond seeking compliance and move into supporting improvement. Many staff told us that continual requests for data did little to support a culture of improvement and respect. While action had been taken to address areas of concern arising from a stronger lens into practice, senior leaders acknowledged that there was scope for a greater understanding of the themes contributing to meaningful change and more transparent communication with, and involvement from, staff. While they were confident that regular quality assurance activity was contributing to improvement, tangible evidence of this was limited. Senior leaders acknowledged more needed to be done to demonstrate the direct link between quality assurance and improvement work.

Overall, the slow rate of demonstrable improvements arising from better knowledge through data collection had not matched the fast pace of developments in quality assurance frameworks. Despite the range of lenses into practice, levels of assurance expressed by senior leaders varied.

### **Key line of enquiry 3: The extent to which senior leaders direct, promote and demonstrate an effective, safe and inclusive culture in which staff are supported.**

#### **Confidence across operational teams**

A growing culture of trust and respect was described by staff within and across operational teams. The majority of staff said they felt listened to and respected by colleagues across children's social work services. Almost all staff felt valued by their immediate line manager and received regular supervision or opportunities to speak with a line manager. Supervision focussed on a broad range of issues including workload management, development goals, practice issues, learning and development and personal wellbeing. Overall, staff said supervision helped their confidence in identifying risk and need, undertaking assessment and planning, as well as monitoring and reviewing improvements. All staff said they had the knowledge, skills and confidence to identify and report signs of child abuse, neglect and exploitation.

A growing culture of reflective practice was also evident within operational teams. Most staff said they were supported to uphold social work values in their role. Feedback on audit activity was regularly given by the QA team to team managers and was being more positively received by teams. Team managers and leaders reported an increased appetite for, and valuing of, quality assurance activity by staff. This scrutiny of practice had taken time to bed in. Team managers, however, had worked hard to reframe this with staff from quality assurance being viewed as a compliance activity to one which had value in supporting learning and improvement. Recent investment in whole service reflective practice events evidenced efforts by leaders to embed this culture of learning across the whole service.

#### **Confidence in senior leaders**

While staff said they felt supported by their immediate line managers, they were less confident in their senior leaders. Just over a third of staff felt valued by senior leaders for the work they did. Recruitment and retention of staff remained a recorded risk across risk registers. Some data had been gathered on the existing workforce jointly across children's and justice services, however, it was impacted by concerns about data quality. It demonstrated an ageing workforce, a workforce which did not reflect Edinburgh's diversity and a workforce subject to high living or commuting costs. Accuracy of workforce data, colleague wellbeing and staff morale were all recorded as service risks.

Despite some progress in recruitment and retention, some managers still reported challenges. Of the managers who responded to the staff survey, a quarter said they had the autonomy to recruit quickly and to the level required or had access to human resources or business support to help them to do so. The perception from a significant number of managers who responded to our survey was that an inability to recruit was impacted by both internal constraints, such as finance, or external constraints, such as a lack of suitably qualified candidates. A workforce plan had



been developed, however, it was too early to assess its impact at the time of inspection.

## **Learning and development**

Attendance at learning and development events, particularly core multi-agency courses, had been of concern to leaders. In the year April 2024 - March 2025, a quarter of planned events had to be cancelled due to either lack of attendees or trainer absence. Of the almost 1000 places offered, just over two thirds were booked and only a half of the total number of people who had booked actually attended. The reasons for nonattendance were not recorded. This led to some leaders reporting concerns with fulfilling the expectations in learning and development opportunities to support a workforce competent and confident in areas including child protection.

There had recently been positive improvements in learning and development opportunities offered to staff. A multi-agency booking management system, administrated by business support colleagues, was implemented in April 2025 to support the work of the CPC learning and development subcommittee. Further work was being undertaken to map training needs and develop minimum training standards for staff. A social work services learning and development team had been established to take work forward. The majority of staff responding to our survey said they had regular opportunities for learning, development and training and most staff said the training they had participated in had increased their confidence and skills. Where staff had to access colleagues across social work services for advice and guidance, most staff said they were able to do so. Around six in ten staff said that learning and improvement was modelled across children's social work services. These were promising developments, however, it was too early to assess the sustained nature of improvement at the time of inspection.

There was a clear appetite from team managers to offer more to staff. There were plans by senior leaders to develop approaches to strengthen the learning and development offer, as well as attract suitably qualified and experienced staff to Edinburgh. This included the expansion of a 'grow your own' approach to supporting internal candidates to become qualified social workers; a social work academy to provide intensive induction to new social workers; consideration of a funded social work apprenticeship and a review of the salary and employment arrangements to keep pace with neighbouring local authorities.

## **Policies and procedures**

Significant improvement work had been undertaken to review a previous backlog of policies and procedures. These had been updated and were centrally located and readily available to staff on Orb, the Council staff intranet. A new supervision policy had been recently introduced along with the revised practice standards. Not all staff had felt they were always meaningfully consulted on the development and implementation of policies or procedures, and less than half of survey respondents said that their views were sought when services were being evaluated or developed, although there was evidence of staff consultation across some policies and developments.

A child friendly complaints procedure was in place and complaint themes and investigation outcomes were regularly reported to senior leaders. However, there were concerns from senior leaders that allegations from children and young people about poor practice against staff were being addressed via the complaints procedure. The 'allegations of abuse against staff' procedure had been reviewed to reflect the difference in processes, although there was no evidence, at the time of inspection, to assess the impact of this review.

Most staff responding to our survey said they were clear and confident about how to raise a concern about poor practice within children's social work services. Around four in ten respondents to our staff survey said they had raised concerns about poor practice through the routes available to them. Of those who had, less than half were confident their concerns were listened to and appropriate action was taken. Of those who had escalated concerns, a number had either not received feedback or did not feel appropriate action had been taken.

Of those who had not raised a concern about poor practice, the majority were confident that, had they done so, it would be dealt with appropriately. Around one in ten staff said they would not feel safe or comfortable to raise a concern about poor practice. There was a pervasive view from many staff that leadership decisions and actions were not clearly communicated and, where they were, some staff told us they did not feel it was safe to question or challenge these.

Positively, a revised whistleblowing policy and pathway had been introduced in 2024 as a direct result of a review of organisational culture<sup>6</sup>. The policy helpfully placed a greater emphasis on consensual early resolution, a reduction in process timescales and an independent process for investigating complaints against senior leaders. Elected members welcomed the oversight they had from the anonymous outcome reports from whistleblowing. However, senior leaders were less assured. There were relatively low numbers reported through this route. A significant number of staff expressed anxiety about raising a concern or challenging senior leaders through this pathway. Staff also expressed a degree of confusion around which process should be used, as separate complaints and grievance policies were also in place. Regardless of the independence of the whistleblowing process, and the use of an external agency to triage concerns raised, there remained a belief across staff groups that the whistleblowing process was not confidential. Work had been undertaken by leaders to refine the pathway by which a concern could be raised by a staff member, to give assurance in relation to feedback and to try to engender trust in the process, however, there was more work for leaders to do to communicate with staff and promote safety of the process.

## **Culture**

Overall, just over a third of all staff responding to our survey said there was a culture of openness and transparency in children's social work services. Some work had been undertaken to better understand the experiences of stakeholders, including staff, using a range of methods. Quarterly team briefings from service directors had

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<sup>6</sup> Review of the Whistleblowing and Organisational Culture of the City of Edinburgh Council (2021)

provided an opportunity to inform staff across teams of developments in the service. Feedback from some service reviews provided staff with an overview of collated responses. Consultation had taken place on the service redesign in the form of briefings, presentations and engagement sessions with staff. A recent internal staff supervision survey, however, had elicited a lower than anticipated response.

Despite this effort, only four in ten staff responding to our survey said that leaders communicated regularly with staff at all levels and just over a third said that this communication helped them understand the wider children's social work service. While the chief executive, corporate director and heads of service were visible and engaged face-to-face regularly with many staff, there was no clear mechanism for staff being able to provide feedback to senior leaders. Many staff we spoke with said that lines of communication to leaders were not clear; that there were delays in receiving decisions from some senior leaders and that critical information from internal and national developments was not shared. Public tensions between some senior leaders had contributed to a lack of staff confidence in the cohesion of leadership. Senior leaders, despite improvements in quality assurance approaches, remained equivocal in their confidence about whether practice was of a consistently high enough quality to assure the safety of all children and young people receiving services. This resulted in repeated requests for additional data or information and served to compound the lack of trust already felt by staff.

Senior leaders acknowledged more needed to be done to address communication arrangements and strengthen the feedback cycle. While efforts had been made to inform staff, less attention had been paid to giving feedback on what had been learned, how staff views had been taken into account and how decisions had been made. Leaders acknowledged that a service wide communication strategy was needed, and that a dedicated place for communications, particularly from the work of the chief social work officer, was required. There was a recognised need by both staff and leaders to move away from an over-reliance on email towards forms of communication that would support regular and meaningful engagement and dialogue with staff and partners.

## **Performance**

Changes had been made to strengthen the service's approach to workforce and managing staff performance, but this was not yet having a strong enough impact on line managers' ability to address practice concerns. A performance management framework was in place which included an annual appraisal. Liaison had been taking place with the Council human resources (HR) team via the dedicated HR liaison officer for social work services. Through this work, senior leaders were assured that a previous backlog in registering appropriate professionally qualified social work staff had been fully addressed. Managing staff performance, however, remained a slow process, subject to legal and HR procedures which staff and leaders said was often a barrier to supporting team cohesion or effective practice. Staff and leaders said that some related Council-wide HR policies were not effective at employing the trauma-informed approach they would wish to take within the social work service.

Despite City of Edinburgh Council's stated organisational behaviours of respect, integrity and flexibility, staff and leaders alike believed that entrenched cultures remained which were not always positive.

Senior leaders needed to do more to build on the promising developments started. They needed to demonstrate open communication through a culture of support, fostering self-care strategies, building resilience, investing in their people, driving learning and development and role modelling behaviour which would help create the conditions for a safe and inclusive culture for all staff within which they could then confidently protect children and young people.

## **Concluding statement**

We have identified progress in some areas of the leadership of children's social work services. There were governance, reporting and performance frameworks in place which helped leaders better understand practice. A proposed redesign was in progress. It was anticipated by leaders that this would take forward a commitment to ensure resource was aligned with need. However, some areas of work had only recently started or were at too early a stage to see tangible improvements. The pace of change had been fast in relation to developing governance and reporting frameworks but slower to produce consistent results of improvement. More was needed to enable senior leaders to confidently demonstrate the capacity for sustained improvement which would ensure robust and safe service delivery for all children and young people.

In accordance with the Care Inspectorate's 'Framework for Support and Post Strategic Scrutiny Response' (2024), we will be providing ongoing support to the senior leadership team of children's social work services in the City of Edinburgh to make the improvements identified through this inspection. We will discuss with senior leaders the scale and nature of support required and how progress will be monitored.

## Glossary

**Chief social work officer:** The requirement for every local authority to appoint a professionally qualified chief social work officer (CSWO) is contained within Section 3 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. The particular qualifications are set down in regulations. The overall objective of the CSWO post is to ensure the provision of effective, professional advice to local authorities – elected members and officers – in the authorities' provision of social work services.

**Chief officers group:** is the collective expression for the local police commander and the chief executives of the local authority and NHS board in each local area. Chief officers are individually and collectively responsible for the leadership, direction and scrutiny of their respective child protection services and their child protection committees.

**Child protection committee:** is a locally-based, inter-agency strategic partnership responsible for child protection policy and practice across the public, private and third sectors. Working on behalf of chief officers, its role is to provide individual and collective leadership and direction for the management of child protection services in its area.

**Elected members:** local councillors elected by each community to represent that community's interests at local and national level. Elected members serving on Council committees are responsible for scrutiny of decisions, policies and service delivery.

**Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC):** is a national policy designed to make sure that all children and young people get the help they need when they need it.

**Interagency referral discussion (IRD):** The start of the formal process of information sharing, assessment, analysis and decision making following reported concern about abuse or neglect of a child or young person under the age of 18 years, in relation to familial and non-familial concerns.

**'Looked after'** children and young people: are those who are subject to corporate parenting arrangements in their local authority. The preferred terminology is now 'care experienced'. Edinburgh's terminology in some aspects of the service remains 'looked after'.

**Officers:** Council staff representing their service or area of responsibility before Council committees.

**Trauma informed:** being able to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma, collaboratively adjusting how service delivery takes this into account and responds in a way that supports recovery, does no further harm and recognises and supports people's resilience.

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