

London Borough of Hillingdon

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board¹

Inspection date: 25 November 2013 – 18 December 2013

The overall judgement is **requires improvement**.

There are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. The welfare of looked after children is safeguarded and promoted. However, the authority is not yet delivering good protection and help and/or care for children, young people and families.

1. Children who need help and protection		Requires improvement
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence		Requires improvement
	2.1 Adoption performance	Good
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement
3. Leadership, management and governance		Requires improvement

The effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) **requires improvement**.

The LSCB is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of good.

¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of Local Authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

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Section 1: the Local Authority

Summary of key findings

This Local Authority requires improvement and is not yet good because

- The right decisions about the type of help children and young people need are not always made by some social work managers. This means that a small number of children are being offered services as children in need of help, instead of as children at risk of harm. As a result, these children might not get the immediate help they need at the right time. Social workers and managers sometimes terminate the help they are offering to families too soon, which can result in a rapid referral for help again, for the same problems.
- When social workers undertake assessments for children who need help, important information from the past is not always included in assessments. This means that the help provided might not be at the right level.
- Officers who chair case conferences and review the plans for children, have too many different tasks to do, and are therefore, in some cases, not making sure that child protection planning is always good enough. When children need a plan to keep them safe, core groups of people who work with children often work well together, but this is not always evident in their written plans.
- Officers who review plans for looked after children have too many children to consider. They are therefore not making sure the written care plans they see are strong enough. This means that tasks are not done quickly enough.
- Social workers can often talk about plans for looked after children's care very well. However, written plans that explain what needs to get better, do not always reach the same standard.
- Sometimes, there are multiple changes of social workers. This particularly affects looked after children who need a stable figure in their lives to plan for their care. Because of this, some looked after children are not being visited often enough or seen on their own enough during visits. In addition, their views are not always recorded as well as they should be.
- Some looked after children do not do as well as they should at school, and the systems for monitoring this need to be improved.
- Young people who are ready to leave care do not have good enough written pathway plans. These plans should provide details about what sort of support they are going to get, and how and when this will happen. Too many young people who leave care do not go on to further education and are currently unemployed.
- Senior leaders do not yet have an effective plan in place to help them make sure services are constantly getting better for looked after children.
- The information that tells senior leaders, social workers and their managers what they are doing well and what they need to do better, is not clear enough. It does

not make sure they are informed well enough to consistently improve the services that keep children safe and well cared for.

The Local Authority has the following strengths

- When people who work with children inform social care services that they think children are being harmed, social workers and their partners, including the police, act quickly to investigate and make sure children are safe.
- The introduction of the Children's Pathway programme, to assist the child's journey through social care services, is driven by the Director of Children and Young People's Services (DCS) and has led to some services improving. This can be seen, for example, through the early help offer for children and families. A new early help structure and an early help assessment have been brought in to ensure that families get the support they need, such as parenting classes. As a result, the people who provide early help services now know exactly when they should tell social workers that families need specialist assistance.
- Overall, services to children are improving because the Children's Pathway programme is well understood by councillors, the people who run services for children in the council and their partners. These groups communicate with one another regularly to make sure they know what each other are doing.
- The plan for the council and its partners, to improve the way services are delivered, is presented in an innovative way, bringing together a number of action plans onto a single format and presenting it visually at meetings with people who run services. This shows them what is getting better for children and what still needs to be done.
- Some partnerships which keep children safe are strong. For example, social workers and the police work together with children who are at risk of sexual exploitation and with families who are experiencing domestic violence. Work with partners to help unaccompanied asylum seeking children coming into the country is a particular strength in Hillingdon.
- The majority of children in care live in places that support them well, and the council works hard to make sure that those places can be permanent.
- Therapeutic support is offered to all children in care, including those who live outside the borough. The council is highly committed to helping looked after young people to achieve stability where they live.
- Care leavers have good relationships with their social workers and personal advisers who know them well, and help them get ready to leave care.
- The Local Authority is good at placing looked after children for adoption when this is what they need, and then supporting the adoptive family before and after the court order is made.

What does the Local Authority need to improve?

Areas for improvement

- When families need plans to help their parenting improve, these plans need to be robustly audited and quality assured so that it is clear what families have to do to improve.
- When children and families need an assessment, the assessment needs to be very clear in identifying children's needs. When making decisions about what level of help is required historical information about the family should be taken into account.
- Managers of social work teams need to apply a consistent understanding of thresholds for services, so that children and families get the right help at the right time and that their cases are not closed too early before circumstances have improved.
- When children and young people need written plans in place to help improve their lives, the plans must be of a good quality so that they effectively drive the provision of high quality services to children.
- The independent reviewing service needs to be reviewed to ensure that it can meet its requirements to rigorously scrutinise and challenge the quality of child protection and care plans.
- Children and young people who need social work visits should always receive their statutory entitlement to these visits and they should be seen alone so that their views are always recorded, enabling them to influence plans for their protection and care.
- Looked after children's' educational outcomes need to improve, and the virtual school needs to systematically track progress and take action that closes the gap in attainment as rapidly as possible.
- Care leavers who wish to seek education, employment and training should be better supported to access these services, so that young people can choose the best option for them. This is particularly necessary for employment, through the provision of schemes such as work placements or vocational training.
- Improve the quality of audit and of performance reporting so that it drives an embedded culture of rigorous performance management which transforms the standards of social work practice.
- Improve corporate parenting responsibilities across the partnership to ensure services to looked after children improve and support children to achieve their aspirations.
- Maintain sustained efforts to recruit experienced staff and ensure that all staff receive regular supervision in line with the council's supervision policy.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the Local Authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it's making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the Local Authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of Local Authority functions and the review of the local safeguarding children board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of seven of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

The inspection team

Lead inspector: Ian Young

Team inspectors: Mary Candlin, Brenda McLaughlin, Pietro Battista, Tina Shepherd, Judith Nelson, Christine Davies.

Information about this Local Authority area²

Children living in this area

- Approximately 66,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in the London Borough of Hillingdon. This is 23.4% of the total population in the area (source: ONS Mid-Year Estimates 2012).
- 19% of school-age children are eligible for a free school meal. For children attending primary, secondary and special schools this breaks down as follows (source: Jan 2013 School Census):
 - in primary schools 19% of pupils (the national average is 18%)
 - in secondary schools 19% of pupils (the national average is 15%)
 - in special schools 38% of pupils (the national average is 37%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for approximately 50% of all children living in the area, compared with 22% in the country as a whole (Census 2011).
- The largest minority ethnic group of children and young people in the Borough are "Asian or Asian British" at 26% (Census 2011)
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language is as follows (source: Jan 2013 School Census):
 - in primary schools this is 44% (the national average is 18%)
 - in secondary schools this is 35% (the national average is 14%).

Child protection in this area

- At 31 March 2013, 1,954 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 2,622 at 31 March 2012.
- At 31 March 2013, 218 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is a reduction from 346 at 31 March 2012.
- At 31 March 2013, ten children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is numerically unchanged from the ten children from 31 March 2012.

² The Local Authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 March 2013, 367 children are being looked after by the LA (a rate of 56 per 10,000 children). (For the purposes of published figures Ofsted round to the nearest '5' children looked after). This is a reduction from 375 (58 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2012.
- Of the 367 children looked after at 31 March 2013:
 - 157 (43%) were placed out of borough
 - 87 (24%) were unaccompanied asylum seeking children
 - 45 (12%) were placed in residential children's homes, of which 12 (27%) were out of borough
 - 7 (2%) were placed in residential schools, all of whom were out of borough
 - 252 (69%) were placed in foster care, of whom 126 (50%) were out of borough, with 48 of these less than 20 miles from home, with a further 41 children looked after that arrived in Hillingdon via the airport. 37 local children (15%) were placed in foster care more than 20 miles from home
 - A small number of children were placed with parents – due to very low numbers the data has been suppressed in published returns
 - The remaining 61 children were placed in various types of placement including adoptive placements and independent living.
- In the 12 month to 31 March 2013:
 - there were 15 adoption orders
 - nine children became the subject of special guardianship orders
 - 198 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 14 (7%) subsequently returned to being looked after
 - 60 young people who ceased to be looked after, moved on to independent living.

Other Ofsted inspections

- The Local Authority operates three children's homes. These were judged to be good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The previous inspection of Hillingdon's services for looked after children was in December 2009. The Local Authority was judged to be good.
- The Local Authority's fostering and adoption services were both judged good in their most recent Ofsted inspection.

Other information about this area

- Details of leadership posts:
 - The Director of Children and Young People's Services has been in post since June 2013
 - The Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board has been in post since September 2009.

Inspection judgements about the Local Authority

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection require improvement.

- When children, young people and families encounter difficulties in their lives, they can easily access practical help through a wide range of universally available early help services. Partners take account of the views of children, young people and their families and are effective in addressing concerns, which reduces referrals to social care or specialist support for most children. When families need additional support, plans are now better co-ordinated between schools, children's centres, youth projects and partner agencies, including health. These plans help to target work and reduce the likelihood of harm. Partners have worked well to re-model their early intervention strategy and this joint working is having a positive impact on the lives of families. Practitioners in these settings form strong relationships with families, to help them build resilience to deal with their problems, so that they do not get any worse.
- Early help practitioners share concerns well and offer coherent integrated help to families when concerns are first identified. For example, in the children's centres visited by inspectors, there is good knowledge of universal and targeted services available for families with young children, and plans for help give families good access to the wide range of services available. Inspectors found that the co-ordination of Team around the Family (TAF) arrangements and the use of local early help assessments effectively secure services for those in immediate need. However, the lack of an effective quality assurance and audit system for early help assessments means that the outcomes identified for children are not always clearly defined in TAF plans. As a result, it is difficult to measure what has changed for some children. Moreover, this makes it difficult for professionals to recognise and know what works so that they can repeat the success for other families.
- When a family's problems escalate, the council's Intensive Team within the Family Key Working Service provide a good level of support to prevent problems getting worse. Key workers from the team work well to improve children's wellbeing and diminish risks within families. Case examples show a real reduction of risk of harm to children. The support offered strengthens parenting skills, such as managing children's behaviour or establishing daily routines. This improves children's emotional wellbeing and reduces the need for families to be referred for further specialist services.
- All partner agencies understand the local authority's threshold for services and make appropriate referrals if harm to children and young people is suspected or likely. Most referrals to children's social care services are dealt with effectively by the recently reconfigured Triage and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub team, in partnership with the police. Children requiring protection are identified by the Triage team and passed promptly to the assessment team, where immediate or significant risks are recognised, and swift action is taken to prevent further harm.

- Child protection enquiries are undertaken in a timely manner. They are led by qualified and suitably experienced social workers in conjunction, where appropriate, with the police, and supported by partner agencies so that most children are kept safe. However, there are inconsistencies in the application of thresholds by managers in the long term social work teams. In a small number of cases seen, the threshold for child protection was met, but children were being offered a service as children in need, which in some cases led to a delay in timely protective action.
- Assessments of children's needs by social workers are generally prompt and most assessments result in the delivery of appropriate services. Assessments of children and young people's cultural and ethnic needs have improved following changes to social work teams in line with the Children's Pathway programme. The assessments reviewed by inspectors included appropriately identified risks and the actions required to reduce those risks. Children are usually seen and seen alone. In most cases seen by inspectors, their views are fully considered and they influence the outcomes of assessments. However, this is not yet consistent and the voice of children and young people is not heard or recorded sufficiently in some cases.
- Assessments are not all of a good quality. Some assessments are not informed by historical information. The inconsistent quality of chronologies and recording means that key information is not always available to inform analysis, so that the right services can be promptly provided. This leads to recommendations in some plans that are overly optimistic about what can be achieved by some families. Written plans do not always identify clear, specific changes required within timescales. In some cases this leads to drift and premature closure of others as it is not initially clear what needs to change. Inspectors found that in some instances, this resulted either in re-referrals, or children becoming subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time for the same problems. In a small number of cases tracked or sampled by inspectors, children and young people's plans had not been adapted in response to changes of circumstance or increased levels of risk. In these cases, management oversight was not robust and individual supervision sessions were not held as often as they should have been, so that social workers could be robustly challenged to improve their practice.
- For children with child protection plans, information sharing between agencies and professionals is timely and this helps to keep children safe by focussing clearly on the risks to their safety and what needs to be done to protect them. The Local Authority is in the process of implementing the signs of safety model, which is beginning to improve the quality of child protection plans, but still needs to be robustly embedded. Inspectors have seen evidence at core groups, of positive, active multi-agency intervention and support, which is reducing the risk of harm to children and improving outcomes. However, the staff who chair child protection meetings have a very wide remit and are not always effective in consistently identifying and challenging poor practice, specifically in terms of the quality of written assessments and reports presented at child protection

conferences. Quality assurance of case conference chairs' work by their managers is not of a good standard.

- When privately fostered children and young people are identified by the Local Authority, assessments are good and focussed on ensuring their safety. The Local Authority recognises that the number of children privately fostered is low and have acknowledged the need, identified by the Local Safeguarding Children Board, to raise awareness of these children across partner agencies, so that they are identified early and provided with a service to meet their needs.
- For children who go missing from home or care, the Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Missing Children multi-agency operational meeting convenes regularly, is chaired by a senior social care manager, and focusses appropriately on the needs of individual young people. Inspectors reviewed a number of cases considered by the operations meeting and identified that for those young people, risks are being effectively managed. However, actions are not routinely recorded on their personal files to support individual plans for their protection.
- Monitoring by the Local Authority demonstrates that the numbers of children missing education is on an upward trajectory. The turnover is high because a large proportion of children missing education are of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller heritage. In the current academic year, 237 children were identified as missing from education and all were traced.
- In addition to the operations meeting, the Local Authority and its partners have other effective systems in place for identifying and routinely sharing information to protect children at risk of sexual exploitation. For example, 'Operation OWL' a partnership between police and social workers, has been successful in sharing intelligence, identifying individuals who pose a risk to young people and taking joint action to prevent concerns from escalating.
- Young people who need protection because they enter the country unaccompanied by adults, are kept safe, particularly where there is a risk of them going missing or being sexually exploited or trafficked. The Local Authority has a dedicated stand-by team in Heathrow Airport. Together with their partners in the UK Border Agency, the Local Authority is highly responsive to the needs of unaccompanied minors and trafficked children, resulting in timely risk assessment and positive outcomes for these vulnerable young people. Targeted support is promptly put in place, and comparatively high numbers of these young people enter care from age 14 onwards to keep them safe. Education services are promptly provided with effective provision that assists young people's integration. An active approach is taken to cultural issues and these young people make good progress in English, academic and practical subjects, and generally stay on in education.
- Children with disabilities and their families are offered help and protection when needs and concerns are first identified. A range of cases reviewed by inspectors, including children subject to child protection plans, demonstrated that their circumstances improved as a result of timely interventions. Young people with a disability, and their families, are involved in planning services at a local level. For

example, following consultation with a young person's champion and with parents, schools now provide respite services during holiday periods.

- When children and families need help outside of normal working hours, the Local Authority has a good service which responds to the needs of families. Robust communication with day services is effective in ensuring continuity in meeting children's needs at any time.
- Children and young people who are the subject of statutory plans have good access to and use the services of an independently commissioned advocacy service. The advocacy service ensures children and young people's voices are heard during meetings and sometimes in their written plans. When tracking and sampling cases, inspectors saw evidence of support being provided to young people to assist them in making their views known to professionals, or when making a complaint.
- The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) arrangements for managing and responding to allegations of abuse or mistreatment of children by professionals and carers is effective. Allegations are taken seriously and responded to appropriately.
- For children living in households where domestic violence is in evidence, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) are well established, with good representation and input from partner agencies. Inspectors saw evidence of appropriate communication between the police and children's social care services through the MARAC, and this is helping to protect children.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence require improvement.

- When problems escalate in families to the point that children and young people need to be looked after, professionals act swiftly. They hold family group conferences that are effective in supporting children and their families. When it is the right decision, these conferences succeed in preventing some children coming into care. When children and young people need to be in care, the Public Law Outline process is used effectively and the right decisions are taken to ensure that being looked after is in their best interests. When decisions are made that children and young people can return home, in most cases, assessments and plans are put in place to ensure this is achieved safely and sustainably.
- Good communication between the Independent Reviewing Officers and the Children and Family Court Advisory Service (CAFCAS) means that children's care planning is shared and agreed in most cases. For those young people who come into the country seeking asylum with no one holding parental responsibility for them, legal advice is consistently sought which means they are provided with protection straight away. Legal services within family proceedings are sufficiently resourced and include a dedicated representative who specialises in asylum and immigration.
- When the Local Authority needs to secure a child's care, they make good decisions to apply to the court for legal orders. The average length of care proceedings is improving and social workers are committed to the need to continue to improve timescales, so that children and young people can achieve the right permanence option at the earliest opportunity.
- Some looked after children and young people have had the same social worker over time and have built a positive relationship with them. Life story work is undertaken to help them to understand why they are in care and to explain the plans for their future. In some instances, visits from social workers to children and young people in care are not always timely and some looked after children are not always seen alone by their social workers. This means that some social workers are not fully aware of, or fully recording, the views of looked after children and allowing them to influence their plans. All looked after children have a plan that ensures they are cared for appropriately and address health and educational needs. However, the quality of written plans is not consistent although most are satisfactory. The good plans seen recognised the importance of contact between children and their families where this is in a child's best interests, and contact between brothers and sisters is given a high priority. The majority of social workers know children well and can articulate the plans for the child. However, this is not always reflected in written, individualised care plans. Some plans lack timescales for completing actions, detail about how objectives will be achieved and what progress has been made against the plan.
- Most children and young people looked after are placed within or very close to the borough, they receive visits and support from allocated social workers and are well supported in their health and educational needs. Cases tracked during the inspection included some young people who lived the furthest away from the

Local Authority area. They were visited by regulatory inspectors to gather their views. These visits demonstrated that good placement plans are in place. For example, a young man was in a specialist placement due to his highly complex needs and was being offered intensive support. Effective planning of a commissioned support package included a comprehensive assessment of his emotional wellbeing and the recruitment of a dedicated staff team to provide him with individualised care. This resulted in a marked improvement in his behaviour and functioning and significantly improved his life chances.

- Children and young people are encouraged and supported by the Local Authority to have an active and enthusiastic Children in Care Council. This is facilitated by a highly effective children's rights officer who offers a platform for children and young people to make complaints and raise issues that are important to them. Some children and young people are well involved in improvement projects, and inspectors saw evidence of the influence of these groups in service delivery and design. The majority of young people spoken to are aware of the advocacy service and how to access this to get help and support in ensuring their voice is heard.
- Educational attainment of looked after children and young people is below that of other looked after children nationally at all key stages. The attainment of those young people achieving GCSEs at A*- C is below the national average. The virtual school ensures pastoral support, tuition and practical help are in place to meet individual need. However, systems to track looked after children's progress through personal education plans are currently basic and underdeveloped, meaning the progress of a number of children from their starting point is slow. Funding provided for additional tuition and learning support through personal educational allowances or the Pupil Premium, is not measured for effectiveness. The Local Authority has good systems to monitor school attendance for looked after children, including those placed in schools outside the borough, and puts in place effective pastoral and practical support measures, such as transport. Overall absence levels, which were above the comparable national and London averages in 2012 at 6%, have reduced to 4.6% by the end July 2013.
- Reviews of looked after children's care plans are timely. Immediately prior to review meetings, most children are seen and spoken to by their Independent Reviewing Officer and their views are taken into account. Foster carers and children spoke positively of their Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who, in a number of cases, was the consistent professional in their lives. However, IRO caseloads are high and this impacts on their ability to meet with children early enough to gain their views on setting up the review, or the effectiveness of their care plan. In most cases, the review of care plans was satisfactory, although a few lacked robust challenge in addressing the progress of the plan. This was particularly the case in securing permanence, which leads to drift and delay in progressing plans for a number of children. Minutes of review meetings are given to children and young people but they are not provided in other languages to children whose first language is not English. This limits some young peoples' understanding of what is being written about and planned for them.

- The majority of children and young people benefit from a stable placement that provides for continuity of care and supports them in achieving their aspirations. Where there is a risk of placement breakdown, support for children, young people and their carers is provided via the fostering clinical psychology service, which helps maintain stability of placements. The fostering service ensures that carers offer placements that meet children's needs, with regular training and good support available to carers.
- There is a strong commitment to achieving permanency through legal routes for all children who are looked after. This is promoted by senior managers, well supported by elected members and is an improving picture that is resulting in greater numbers of children being able to remain in placements permanently. Long term financial and social work support is provided to encourage the take up of Special Guardianship by family members and foster carers, including Independent Fostering Agency carers. This is beginning to show an impact by increasing the numbers of children for whom this route to permanency is considered appropriate and in their best interests, and they can be assisted to remain in placement permanently.
- Ambition in seeking permanence for brothers and sisters means that most are placed together. Separation is very carefully considered and is based upon assessment of the children's individual needs. For young children where the plan is for adoption, permanence is progressed in parallel in a timely way. In some cases, where the plan for permanence is long term foster care, there is a delay in prioritising assessments of the suitability of foster carers, although this has been recognised and is being addressed by the Local Authority through the Children's Pathway programme.
- All permanence options are well considered for children by the Local Authority's combined adoption and permanence team. Progress in achieving children's permanency plans is tracked and overseen by regular placement planning meetings (PPMs) and in both statutory reviews and case supervision. However, when adoption or permanency plans need to change, because for example, a suitable family cannot be found to take all brothers and sisters together, there is a lack of clarity about how and by whom that decision should be taken. The Local Authority is aware of this issue and senior managers have appropriate expectations of what the process needs to be. Plans are in place to ensure expectations are consistently understood and followed by all social workers, managers and reviewing officers. For most children, this has not had a negative impact on their stability or permanence in placement as existing carers have come forward to be assessed as permanent carers.

The graded judgement for adoption performance is good.

- When it is not safe or appropriate for children and young people to return to the care of parents or birth family, the Local Authority has a strong commitment to ensure that adoption is considered as early as possible. In the year to date, 80% of children adopted were placed within 12 months of the approval to place for

adoption. There is an effective action plan in place to make further improvements to this figure. Making this a reality for more children is being put into operation by the specialised adoption and permanency team and the children's social work teams. Although the authority recognises that there is still work to do to improve the service further. For example, their aim is to ensure that all social workers in the children's social work teams routinely consider adoption at the earliest opportunity for every child, and make a referral to the adoption and permanency team, so that the search for a suitable family can begin in a timely manner.

- The review of the structure of the adoption and permanency team as part of the Children's Pathway programme has led to the creation of two sub teams; one with a focus on family finding and another with a focus on assessment of applicants, and this has sharpened the focus on both of these aspects. The improved and streamlined processes for recruitment, training and assessment of adopters, matching with children and effective support is having a positive impact for children. The choice of placements is increasing and the identification of potential placements happens quickly. As a result, more children are able to live with their permanent family sooner. The Local Authority's current data shows a considerable reduction in the time between a child becoming looked after and being placed for adoption, from an average of 704 days between 2009 to 2012, to 581 days in the year to date, which is better than comparators. Whilst the court process continues to cause delays in achieving permanence, and cases are not yet being concluded within the recommended 26 weeks, the average time from receiving the court's authority to place, to a child being placed for adoption is improving. It was 151 days in 2011/12 an improvement on the previous year and better than both the national average and statistical neighbours.
- Robust monitoring is in place to ensure delays are minimised. There are 22 children currently with an adoption plan for whom a match has not yet been identified and this number has reduced from 26 in April 2013. As a result of streamlining the recruitment process, there is a 40% increase in the number of adopters approved and more of those adopters are being approved within the required timescale. In 2012/13, 73% of new adopters were approved within eight months and the Local Authority's own information shows that 75% of approvals are now being completed within six months. Adopters spoken to by inspectors said that they had received prompt responses throughout the process, and frequent visiting from experienced social workers meant that their approvals progressed to consideration by the adoption panel in a timely way. All adopters approved at the panel are asked to consider fostering to adopt, and two children have so far been placed under this scheme, which will enable those children to remain with the same carers if the adoption plan is successful.
- Social workers undertake good quality, timely assessments and say that training is helping them to continually improve their analytical and assessment skills. Adopters said that they receive good training, and their assessing social worker encourages and enables them to think more widely about the range of children they could care for, for example older children and whether they could take brothers and sisters. This has both developed adopters and widened the resource available 'in house'.

- The combined adoption and permanency panel has an independent chair whose role promotes overview and consistency of approach. The fortnightly frequency of panels helps to minimise the potential for delay in achieving a child's adoption plan, by approving new carers and considering matches for children promptly. Rigorous scrutiny of assessment and potential matches for children is an effective quality assurance mechanism, providing valuable feedback about quality and identifying learning and development points for staff, so that practice can continually improve. As the agency decision maker, the DCS considers the panel's recommendations thoroughly and promptly, ensuring that there is no delay in making the right decisions about children's futures.
- Effective parallel adoption planning is increasingly in place which means that the search for potential adopters can begin while assessments of the birth family are taking place during legal proceedings. The progress of individual children's adoption plans are monitored effectively by regular Permanency Planning Meetings and at statutory reviews. Good use is made of case histories, so adopters of older siblings are routinely approached early in the process as a potential match and to explore whether they would consider a concurrent placement. A wide range of family finding strategies are used and tailored for each child. Any links are promptly and diligently pursued and there is effective liaison with the child's social worker.
- Overall, timescales for achieving adoption for children and young people are good and improving. However, some children continue to wait too long and timescales for the formal review of adoption plans are not yet fully in place. Children are helped while waiting, to understand their past, express feelings and be prepared for the future. They also benefit from careful assessment by social workers of how best to meet the individual needs of brothers and sisters, and time is taken to explore fully whether they can be placed together. As a result, placements are more likely to be suitable, stable and meet their needs. There have been no adoption disruptions since April 2010.
- A dedicated member of staff ensures a good range of in house support and effective signposting to a wide range of commissioned post-adoption support services. 'Letterbox' contact and direct contact arrangements are well organised. Adopters spoken to by inspectors were very positive about the service that they and their children had received from the adoption team from the point of placement, particularly the frequency and reliability of visits. They valued the continued access to social work advice and support after the order was granted and talked about the help they and their children receive to prepare for and to maintain direct contact with birth families, especially with brothers and sisters.

The graded judgement for the experiences and progress of care leavers is requires improvement.

- Care leavers were highly complimentary about the access they get to a broad range of services through the Young People's team, which has been formed as part of the Children's Pathway programme. Social workers and personal advisors build purposeful relationships and get to know young people well through frequent direct contact. Case files show that the team draws a wide range of

information from partners and works with each young person to assess their individual needs.

- Practitioners tailor their work to meet care leavers' immediate needs. Those with learning difficulties are supported well. However, this high quality level of support is not always consistently reflected in written pathway plans, the plans do not always identify who is responsible for delivering each task, or by when the task should be complete. Examples seen lacked detail in one or more areas so that progress of the plans cannot be measured and do not have contingency plans to cover potential changes in circumstances. Reviews take place regularly and incorporate young people's views, although the small number of young people who spoke to inspectors do not find the formal reviewing process or documentation helpful. Systems to support high quality pathway planning are not yet fully in place.
- Too many care leavers are not in education, training and employment by comparison with their local peers. This remains a key priority for the Local Authority. Information, advice and guidance are offered to those who go into employment, and young people have been successful in the small number of apprenticeships secured by the council. However, a comparatively high proportion of those not continuing in training or education are unemployed. Services leading to suitable work experience or vocational training are not well developed. However, a number of care leavers are given financial and practical support to achieve success in higher education which includes help with transport and accommodation.
- The great majority of care leavers are guided and supported well and are in safe, suitable housing, although a small number of young people make two or more moves on leaving care before they find settled housing. Young people have access to a good range of accommodation, including some options that include more intensive support. When their status is unclear, young asylum seekers are helped to secure legal advice services, so the right choices can be offered.
- The health needs of young people leaving care and care leavers are supported well. Health assessments take place before young people leave care and a clear action plan was in place in cases reviewed by inspectors. Social workers and personal advisors ensure that young people are aware of their entitlement to continuing health support, although the young peoples' views of what is important in their health is not always clearly recorded on pathway plans.
- Most young people who spoke to inspectors know about their rights and how to access services, although they said they would like more access to information in varied written and electronic formats. Young people are supported in making sensible choices about their health, lifestyles, well-being and managing finances, and this is informed by a well-publicised charter of their rights.

Leadership, management and governance requires improvement

- Strategic managers and the lead elected member demonstrate an appropriate understanding of strategic and operational priorities. The lines of accountability between the Chief Executive, Director of Children and Young People's Service

(DCS) and the lead member are strong. There are clear reporting arrangements across the Children's Pathway transformation programme to monitor and review key priorities, of which the DCS is the key driver. They are fully aware of challenges and weaknesses and use external scrutiny well, such as the recent safeguarding diagnostic undertaken by the Local Government Association, to drive improvement. This has led to the development of several key areas for improving safeguarding practice, such as reviewing child protection plans to make them more outcome focused, and these are promoted by the council's senior leaders through the monthly Safeguarding Review Board. Clear accountabilities exist between the Chief Executive and Hillingdon Safeguarding Children Board chair, who meet regularly to discuss safeguarding issues.

- Established arrangements are in place for the council, together with its partner agencies including health, to commission services for children and young people. For example, a needs assessment has been used to reshape and strengthen the early identification of need and early help pathways, which means that families can access support prior to assessment for targeted or specialist provision. As part of a commitment to placing looked after children locally and supporting the principles of achieving best value, the council are part of the West London Alliance Children's Services Efficiencies programme. This programme effectively underpins the sufficiency strategy, and has recently resulted in an increase in local foster care provision as part of the Children's Pathway Programme. Whilst the Local Authority recognises the need to continue increasing the number of in house foster care options, placement decisions are based on achieving high quality outcomes that are needs led, rather than cost based. The Local Authority also works in partnership with providers to secure a sufficient range of local housing options for care leavers.
- A key strength of the council is its commitment to the emotional support of young people by investing in the provision of specialised therapeutic support, which is offered to all looked after children, including those in out of borough placements. While the Local Authority is in the process of collating detailed placement and health performance information across the partnership, this has yet to be finalised. Consequently, the council does not yet fully capture or communicate details of looked after children and care leavers' health needs sufficiently. This includes CAMHS provision, which is under a comprehensive review.
- The recent rigorous review of the work of the corporate parenting board, undertaken by the Local Authority, has led to the strengthening of the board's structures. However, it is too early in the implementation phase to fully demonstrate impact. The Local Authority does not currently operate to an overarching strategic corporate parenting plan, and progress against its current work plan has not been swift or focussed enough to deliver its objectives.
- Members and officers have a clear commitment to corporate parenting and actively champion the needs of children and young people. This is evident from the support provided to the children in care council, where looked after children and care leavers are very well supported to have a voice and influence changes to their lives. Inspectors found recent evidence of young people's views and experiences influencing changes in the development and provision of services,

such as the increase in the care leavers grant and access to driving lessons to improve young people's employability. The council's commitment to celebrating children's aspirations and achievements is good, including the well attended, positive, annual 'Kids in Care Awards'. The Local Authority recognises that issues, such as closing the education gap between looked after children and their peers, improving the frequency and quality of social work visits to looked after children, remain key priorities.

- A wealth of performance information is used across strategic and operational forums to drive improvement and raise standards. However, inspectors found performance reports were sometimes overly technical and not as clear as they could be on what wasn't working well. This gave some middle managers an overly positive impression in some key areas of activity, negatively impacting on their ability to drive improvement. The council's electronic recording system could assist with this issue, however, it is not yet fully utilised to support performance management. Plans are in place to improve performance management and quality assurance arrangements through the innovative Performance Improvement Plan, which consolidates action planning across the partnership and supports effective joint monitoring and review of progress. The Local Authority and its partners recognise that this positive development needs to be further strengthened by a sharper focus on demonstrating outcomes for children from planned activity.
- The narratives that underpin audits, undertaken by social care managers to support this inspection, were evaluative, and aligned with inspection findings in most cases. The Local Authority has recognised that the ratings attributed to these cases, together with those in a random sample of routine audits, were not consistently robust and did not routinely provide an accurate picture of social work practice, or sufficiently inform learning.
- No children were identified as being left at immediate risk of significant harm during the inspection. However, in some cases the consistency of management oversight and decision making and the quality of social work practice was not sufficiently robust. During the inspection a small number of cases were therefore referred back to the Local Authority, and the DCS took appropriate, swift action in response to concerns raised.
- The Local Authority has made sustained efforts to prioritise additional resources, increasing the numbers of social work posts and securing some permanent staff as a result. Despite this, there remains a lack of stability brought about by the shortage of permanent and experienced workers across front line services. This poses a significant constraint to the delivery of the Children's Pathway transformation programme. It results in children not being allocated to a consistent professional who tenaciously drives plans forward. Also, a high number of posts across front line practice, including senior manager positions are interim, and this does not support stability or continuity in service provision.
- Workers were positive about their managers, including senior managers. They value the approach of grouping workers in PODs which provides for reflective discussion of cases and supports learning. As part of the Children's Pathway

programme, the Local Authority has invested in a training programme for front line managers in reflective supervision. However, the frequency of individual supervision sessions is not sufficiently regular to meet the council's own supervision policy, and a small number workers reported significant gaps. In addition, inspectors found the quality and frequency of some supervision records was inconsistent.

- The Local Authority demonstrates commitment to recruiting, investing in and training its workforce. Although personal development plans were not routinely completed, the Principal Social Worker (PSW) facilitates access to an online discussion forum to promote sharing of good practice. This role is effective and champions social workers' career paths by updating their knowledge and skills through research and training, which are disseminated well and are easily accessible. The PSW also produces briefings from lessons learned from serious case reviews nationally. Newly qualified social workers are supported well and developing a career pathway for all staff is a key priority. However, some staff report that capacity issues within their service negatively impacts on their ability to take up the training opportunities offered.
- Clear processes are in place to support children, young people and their families to make complaints, and feedback is used to inform learning. The approach adopted to responding to complaints reflects a learning culture and priority is given to this important area of work. Response to complaints has not historically been timely, but recent performance information shows significant improvement. Children and families making complaints and compliments have access to an independent advocacy and children's rights service and evidence of take up of these services was demonstrated.

What the inspection judgements mean: the local authority

An **outstanding** local authority leads highly effective services that contribute to significantly improved outcomes for children and young people who need help and protection and care. Their progress exceeds expectations and is sustained over time.

A **good** local authority leads effective services that help, protect and care for children and young people and those who are looked after and care leavers have their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

In a local authority that **requires improvement**, there are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. The welfare of looked after children is safeguarded and promoted. Minimum requirements are in place, however, the authority is not yet delivering good protection, help and care for children, young people and families.

A local authority that is **inadequate** is providing services where there are widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm or result in children looked after or care leavers not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Section 2: The effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board

The effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) requires improvement.

Areas for improvement

- Ensure that time allocated to LSCB meetings is sufficient for partners to effectively undertake its work.
- Improve the communication with other strategic bodies such as the Health and Wellbeing Board, to ensure strategies aiming to improve the lives of children and young people are effectively co-ordinated.
- Ensure that the LSCB effectively evaluates safeguarding performance through audit and performance monitoring of multi-agency activity, and makes sure the evaluation is used to improve services.
- Ensure that the LSCB provides effective challenge to partners and holds partners to account to improve safeguarding outcomes for children and young people.
- Ensure that children, families and the community are appropriately engaged in the work of the LSCB strategically and operationally, so that its work reflects their views.
- Ensure that partners are appropriately engaged in developing and delivering multi-agency aspects of the signs of safety approach to risk management, so that there is full multiagency engagement in identifying risks and strengths to keep children safe.
- Ensure that the impact and effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding training is evaluated so that its effectiveness can be assessed and improved.

Key strengths and weaknesses of the LSCB

- The LSCB complies with its statutory responsibilities. The Annual Report has recently been produced and it provides a comprehensive review of the work of the Board, and demonstrates how the Board, through its partner agencies, co-ordinates work to safeguard children in the area. Clear priorities are set out in an achievable and measurable action plan. One priority, to engage children, families and the community, has not been sufficiently progressed at either strategic or operational levels. Therefore its work does not reflect children's views. This commitment has, however, been renewed, together with an undertaking to make effective use of the lay members appointed earlier this year in this regard.
- The terms of reference for the LSCB are clear but need to be refreshed to encompass its developing role. Governance arrangements are appropriately established between the LSCB, the Local Authority's Chief Executive, senior managers and the Children's Trust. However, protocols between the LSCB and other key partnerships such as the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Community Safety Partnership have yet to be formalised.

- The role of the LSCB Chair is sufficiently independent. The LSCB Chair also chairs the Adult Safeguarding Board (ASB), which benefits from communication across both boards and provides an opportunity for members to meet, as the boards sit on the same day. The LSCB has recognised the time allocated to both the LSCB and ASB components is insufficient to enable appropriate governance, and plans are in place to increase the time allocations for these respective meetings. The LSCB is at an early stage of developing oversight of, and involvement in, early intervention. It has influenced the development of the early help assessment and Team Around the Family plan replacing the Common Assessment Framework.
- Performance management and analysis are not sufficiently well developed within the Board. The LSCB monitors front-line practice by individual partner agencies through a range of individual agency audits and performance management information. Issues arising from these are routinely considered by the LSCB performance sub group and are reported on to the Board. However, monitoring and evaluation on a multi-agency basis is underdeveloped at this stage. The LSCB introduced multi-agency audits very recently and only eight cases have so far been reviewed with limited impact as yet on the safeguarding system. Prior to the implementation of the multi-agency audits, the LSCB carried out comprehensive management reviews on four specific cases in 2012/2013.
- Whilst the LSCB has reviewed some key areas of performance; others have not yet received sufficient analysis, in particular, the significant drop in children subject to child protection plans and the significant rise in the proportion of children subject to repeat plans. This lack of scrutiny has occurred in the context of the board acknowledging concerns about the smartness and effectiveness of child protection plans, staff turnover and the quality of assessments and management oversight.
- The LSCB has also not ensured that the multi-agency implications of the roll out of the signs of safety approach have been systematically addressed. This is particularly within child protection conferences, so that the whole partnership is engaged in this approach to recognising risks and strengths in families in keeping their children safe.
- The LSCB regularly receives updates from member agencies, which enable partners to have a clear understanding of issues affecting the delivery of safeguarding services across the local area. For example, updates detail any significant organisational and staffing changes, staffing shortages and the need to improve the quality of some aspects of child protection practice and management oversight. Whilst this is information sharing, there is little evidence that it results in effective challenge to partners, or holding partners to account, in a way that that improves the delivery of services or outcomes for vulnerable children.
- Safeguarding is a priority for all key partners. There is appropriate representation of partner agencies within the sub/working groups of the LSCB. However, the LSCB annual report demonstrates that over the last year, representation by some partners at the LSCB meetings has significantly decreased from the previous year. However, the LSCB chair has undertaken significant engagement with partner

agencies and through the London Safeguarding Board, to improve partners participation and attendance.

- The LSCB has established appropriate priorities based on local needs and is prompt to respond to emerging local and national issues. Safeguarding Audits under Section 11 of the Children Act 2004, were completed last year by partner agencies, confirming that all partners are appropriately prioritising safeguarding.
- Effective systems are established to ensure child sexual exploitation, trafficking, missing children and child deaths, are appropriately overseen by the Board. The LSCB is aware of the need for all partners to improve private fostering notifications. However, specific action to raise awareness and notification of children privately fostered in the local schools has not yet been successful and as a result, the number of notifications currently remains low.
- Whilst no local Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) have been recently undertaken, the LSCB has implemented learning from previous SCRs and national findings, alongside learning from individual agency reviews. Learning is incorporated well into the extensive LSCB training programme which is well established and is well attended by partner agencies. LSCB training is responsive to the Board's priorities and partner agency's needs. For example, it is now providing signs of safety training for partner agencies. However, the evaluation of the impact of training is at an early stage of development.

What the inspection judgments mean: the LSCB

An **outstanding** LSCB is highly influential in improving the care and protection of children. Their evaluation of performance is exceptional and helps the local authority and its partners to understand the difference that services make and where they need to improve. The LSCB creates and fosters an effective learning culture.

An LSCB that is **good** coordinates the activity of statutory partners and monitors the effectiveness of local arrangements. Multi-agency training in the protection and care of children is effective and evaluated regularly for impact. The LSCB provides robust and rigorous evaluation and analysis of local performance that identifies areas for improvement and influences the planning and delivery of high-quality services.

An LSCB **requires improvement** if it does not yet demonstrate the characteristics of good.

An LSCB that is **inadequate** does not demonstrate that it has effective arrangements in place and the required skills to discharge its statutory functions. It does not understand the experiences of children and young people locally and fails to identify where improvements can be made.

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