

# London Borough of Lambeth

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

Inspection date: 29 January to 22 February 2018

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<b>Children's services in London Borough of Lambeth require improvement to be good</b>		
<b>1. Children who need help and protection</b>		Requires Improvement
<b>2. Children looked after and achieving permanence</b>		Requires Improvement
	2.1 Adoption performance	Inadequate
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires Improvement
<b>3. Leadership, management and governance</b>		Requires Improvement

## Executive summary

This is a re-inspection of children's services in Lambeth, after they were judged to be inadequate in 2015. Early progress was very limited, with significant challenges around workforce instability and implementing performance management systems. Since the most recent appointments of senior leaders in 2016, the pace of improvement has accelerated. Senior leaders and elected members have shown determination to improve services for children and their families. They have prioritised services for children, committing significant financial investment. This has resulted in a more stable workforce and lower caseloads, which are improving social work practice and the lives of children. Stronger, more stable leadership and committed corporate parenting mean that most vulnerable children are supported well. Children's views influence policy and service development.

There is not enough focus on achieving early permanence for children and for those with a plan for adoption, practice is inadequate. A lack of decisive and timely action has resulted in drift and delay in securing adoptive families for too many children. Most children subject to placement orders have not yet achieved permanence, although the majority have been matched and placed. Recruitment of adopters has not been proactive or effective enough in recruiting sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children in Lambeth. Children whose plans are for them to remain in care until they are adults wait too long for this to be formally agreed, which results in uncertainty about the future for some of these children.

Partnership working is a strength in Lambeth. The authority has worked hard to build partners' confidence in children's services and improve wider safeguarding practice. The response to children at risk of child sexual exploitation and who go missing is stronger than at the last inspection. The introduction of a 'young people's safety plan' (YPSP) is supporting the understanding and management of risk. However, the multi-agency response to young people entrenched in criminal behaviour and associated gang activity is less developed. A lack of suitable alternative emergency accommodation means that children inappropriately stay overnight in custody.

Integrated, multi-agency recognition and response to risk at the 'front door' is effective. Improved management oversight of decisions ensures that risks to children are identified quickly and assessed effectively. Children are made subject to plans that are proportionate to risk, and recent better management oversight is improving practice. Services for disabled children have significantly improved. Children's needs are assessed in the context of the whole family and lead to creative packages of support.

Social workers visit children often. Sensitive direct work with children ascertains their wishes and feelings and informs assessments and plans. The quality of assessments overall is improving, but the focus on children's experiences is not yet evident in all. In particular, young people who present as homeless do not have all their circumstances or needs fully explored.

In some cases, children who require specialist assessments wait too long for these assessments to take place. A small number of children on child protection plans and living with family members have not had their placement needs sufficiently assessed. This has resulted in some children experiencing delays in decisions being made about who they will live with long term.

Children looked after live in increasingly stable homes with carers who are committed and ambitious advocates. They do well in school and a high number attend university, many remaining with their carers while they complete their studies. Not all children looked after or who are being adopted have information they need about their early life to help them understand why they do not live with their birth families.

The small number of children in care who have substance misuse difficulties do not have their assessed needs met effectively. Very few have access to specialist support to help them and this hinders their chances to do well.

Generally, children looked after are supported to participate in the reviews of their plans, although few attend their reviews. Many children spoken to on this inspection have experienced frequent changes of social worker and reviewing officers, which makes it difficult for them to develop trusting relationships. While social workers represent their wishes and feelings, too few children have an independent visitor or advocate to support them. This includes children who are subject to a child protection plan.

Most young people leaving care get the support they need to live successful, independent lives. Young people value highly their relationships with their personal advisers, who act as effective advocates. However, the number of young people leaving care who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is too high. Pathway plans address the key aspects of most young people's lives and the risks and barriers that they face. However, practice is not assertive enough for some disengaged young people, and there is too much emphasis on young people themselves completing the identified actions.

The local authority has developed a number of tools to collect and analyse performance data. As a more comprehensive quality assurance and performance framework has emerged, leaders and managers have a better understanding of compliance and of the quality of practice across most services. However, this requires further work to ensure that information is accurate and can measure progress against outcomes for children as well as compliance with procedures. Inaccurate performance information has hindered strategic understanding and attention in some areas, such as adoption performance, where insufficient progress has been made since the last inspection.

A successful workforce strategy has been instrumental in improving the retention and numbers of permanent staff. The 'children at the heart of practice' framework is contributing to improved child-centred practice. Supervision and management oversight are improving. Regular group supervision, practice forums, case

consultation and coaching from advanced practitioners are valued by social workers and are improving practice and outcomes for children.

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## Information about this local authority area<sup>1</sup>

### Previous Ofsted inspections

- The local authority does not operate any children's homes.
- The last inspection report for the local authority's children's services was published in May 2015. The judgements for the local authority were:
  - Overall effectiveness: Inadequate
  - Children who need help and protection: Requires improvement to be good
  - Children looked after and achieving permanence: Inadequate
    - Adoption performance: Inadequate
    - Experiences and progress of care leavers: Requires improvement to be good.
  - Leadership, management and governance: Inadequate.

### Local leadership

- The director of children's services (DCS) has been in post since May 2016.
- The chief executive has been in post since November 2017.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board has been in post since May 2016.

### Children living in this area

- Approximately 63,210 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Lambeth. This is 19% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 27% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
  - in primary schools is 23% (the national average is 14%)
  - in secondary schools is 24% (the national average is 13%).
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 64% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Black or Black British and Mixed.
- The proportion of children with English as an additional language:
  - in primary schools is 51% (the national average is 21%)

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- in secondary schools is 45% (the national average is 16%).

### **Child protection in this area**

- At 29 January 2018, 2,789 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 2,793 at 31 March 2017.
- At 29 January 2018, 296 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 47 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 158 children (25 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- At 29 January 2018, 13 children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is a reduction from 18 at 31 March 2015.
- In the two years prior to inspection, three serious incident notifications were submitted to Ofsted and one serious case review had been completed at the time of the inspection.

### **Children looked after in this area**

- At 29 January 2018, 407 children are being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 65 per 10,000 children). This is a reduction from 415 (66 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
  - 294 (or 72%) live outside the local authority area
  - 43 live in residential children's homes, of whom 36 live out of the authority area
  - four live in residential special schools<sup>2</sup> out of the authority area
  - 301 live with foster families, of whom 69% live out of the authority area
  - 12 live with parents, of whom three live out of the authority area
  - 55 children (under 18 years) are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
  - there have been nine adoptions
  - 12 children became subject of special guardianship orders
  - 209 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 6.6% subsequently returned to be looked after
  - 30 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living

- no children ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

## Recommendations

1. Consider permanence for children at the earliest stage of assessment and planning, including contingency and parallel plans, so that decisive and timely action is taken to ensure that children are protected and appropriately cared for. Ensure that adoption is proactively considered for all children, where appropriate, in timescales which meet their needs.
2. Recruit sufficient adopters to meet the need of children in Lambeth who have a plan for adoption, and do this through more timely and effective responses to enquiries from prospective adopters.
3. Consider how to better engage young people who are gang affiliated, leaving custody, and those who have more entrenched criminal behaviours, so that they achieve better outcomes. Take steps to integrate work between social care and youth offending services to support improved multi-agency working in reducing risks to this group of vulnerable adolescents.
4. Improve the frequency, quality and consistency of management oversight and supervision in all teams. Ensure that supervision is regular, reflective and challenging, and that managers record the rationale for their case decisions.
5. Improve the quality of assessments so that the lived experiences of children are fully understood and that they inform plans. In particular, ensure that the risks and vulnerabilities of 16- and 17-year-olds presenting as homeless are fully explored.
6. Develop an approach for assessing and responding to children detained in custody. This includes assessing and providing suitable alternative emergency accommodation.
7. Confirm permanence plans for children in long-term foster placements to give them certainty about their future.
8. Improve oversight of children in care with substance misuse difficulties and ensure that services and interventions are sufficient for them to receive the right help at the right time.
9. Ensure that children and young people looked after and those who are adopted or cared for through special guardianship receive good quality life-story work, so that they understand what has happened in their lives.
10. Increase the number of children who benefit from the support of an advocate or independent visitor, including children with a child protection plan.



11. Offer more practical and timely help to ensure that young people leaving care gain the skills and attitudes they need to better engage in education, employment or training.
12. Continue to develop more accurate and meaningful data to understand and improve social work practice and the experiences of all children who receive services in Lambeth.

## Summary for children and young people

- Services to support children who are looked after in Lambeth have improved since the last inspection in 2015. Managers and social workers know that there is more to do, especially for those children who have a plan for adoption, so that children who cannot live with their families receive good services at the time they need them.
- Children and families receive help at an early stage, and when difficulties arise, professionals work well together to protect those children and young people who are most at risk. This means that they are protected from harm.
- Some social work assessments and plans are not yet good enough. This makes it harder for families to understand what needs to change to make things better. It sometimes takes too long for plans to help improve things for children.
- Social workers spend time with children, listening to their views and to any worries that they may have. Since more social workers have come to work in Lambeth, children are starting to build trusting relationships with them. This is improving for children looked after particularly, as more social workers are choosing to work permanently in the children looked after teams in Lambeth.
- Social workers and police officers are working better together to find children who go missing from home or care and at risk from dangerous people in the community. There is more to be done to make sure that risk is being reduced for children who run away, or who are at risk of getting involved in crime, so that they are supported well and they feel safe.
- Children and young people only come into care if they cannot live safely at home with their families. The right permanent families for children who cannot live with their families are not confirmed soon enough. This means that not all children feel secure about knowing where they will live into adulthood.
- Foster carers provide good support and care, and increasingly more young people are able to live with their foster families after they are 18 years old, particularly if they attend university. Children who are looked after are doing well in education and receive good support to achieve their best.
- When adoption is the best plan for children, the right family for them is not found quickly enough and some children wait much too long to know where they will grow up and be well cared for. When children are placed in their adoptive home, it takes too long for them to become legally adopted.
- Most care leavers live in good-quality accommodation in which they feel safe. Many young people are helped to live independently and are supported to have their own tenancy, which they value. Care leavers get on well with their personal advisers and social workers, although not enough young people are in education, employment or training.

<b>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</b>	<b>Requires improvement to be good</b>
<p>Services for children in need of help and protection require improvement. However, a wide range of early help services provide effective responses to vulnerable families. Successful interventions from skilled early help practitioners are reducing the need for social work intervention for some children and families.</p> <p>The integrated referral hub (IRH), provides an effective 'front door' to all children's social care services. Risks to children are recognised and immediate safeguarding responses are appropriate. Decisions made in the IRH are effective and children's cases escalated to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are quickly and decisively responded to.</p> <p>In some cases, initial visits by social workers to see children as part of their assessments are not taking place quickly enough, so some children experience delays in their needs being identified. Subsequent visits are regular and social workers conduct direct work with children sensitively, using age appropriate tools to ascertain their wishes and feelings. However, frequent changes of social workers make it difficult for some children to build trusting relationships with them.</p> <p>Lambeth local authority's recent introduction of a relationship-based framework, 'Children at the heart of practice', is helping to improve the quality of assessments and plans. However, some assessments do not yet identify all children's needs and many plans are not purposeful. Some children wait too long for specialist assessments to be carried out to determine who they will live with in the future.</p> <p>Decisions to make children subject to plans are appropriate, and emerging action plans mostly detail risks and concerns. While most child protection conferences support parents to participate in these meetings, there are no formal advocacy support arrangements for children, and very few attend their conferences. There is increasing evidence of management oversight in children's records. However, this is not yet consistently effective in improving practice or ensuring that children's plans are appropriately or promptly progressed.</p> <p>Services for disabled children have significantly improved since the last inspection. There is now effective support, with imaginative care packages for disabled children and other members of the family.</p> <p>Better partnership working and intelligence sharing have improved the ability of services to disrupt child sexual exploitation activity and reduce the likelihood of further missing episodes. The recent introduction of a 'young people's safety plan' is beginning to help with the understanding and management of high risk for some children. However, these plans are not yet effective for all children, particularly those who have been known to services for years and have an entrenched involvement in gangs or criminal activity.</p>	

## Inspection findings

13. A good range of voluntary, community and commissioned early help services provide effective support and improve children and families' circumstances in Lambeth. These services include 23 children's centres, which continue to work well with partners to provide health, educational and parenting support. The merging of the local authority's early help and 'troubled families' services in July 2016 has further strengthened the targeted support offer to families, which has meant that some have not then needed statutory services.
14. Most early help assessments draw on previous history and clearly identify the needs of each family member. Good use is made of partner agencies and the family's own network to support and review children's progress and achievements. Skilled early help practitioners support families to improve relationships, tackle problems, make good progress and prevent their problems from escalating. When progress is not made and safeguarding concerns become evident, children and their families are appropriately stepped up from early help services to statutory services via the integrated referral hub (IRH).
15. In August 2017, early help, first response, and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) services were co-located in the IRH. These services work successfully together, ensuring that all new enquiries about children are appropriately responded to. Increased management capacity in the IRH ensures that all decisions are made by qualified social work managers, and their rationale for decisions are clearly recorded.
16. Managers are clear about which children's circumstances would benefit from multi-agency information sharing within the MASH. Decisions are made quickly by IRH team managers and are proportionate. MASH daily partnership meetings are effective forums for sharing information, discussing safeguarding concerns, identifying further risks and ensuring follow-through on actions. Partners take responsibility for follow-up and feedback to their own agencies.
17. Children who require immediate protection receive an appropriate initial response to presenting risk. Children's cases are passed directly from the IRH to the relevant team for follow-up. However, not all children's cases progress quickly through the IRH. In particular, the response to some children whose needs are less urgent is noticeably delayed. Consequently, the initial visit to see these children from the point of referral is not always timely, and there is delay in identifying and meeting the needs of some children.
18. Decisive action taken by the local authority following a review of child protection practice in 2017 means that managers are more assured about the quality of social work intervention. Child protection investigations and decisions to protect children are appropriately led by team managers in consultation with the police, and they are well informed by the professional network. Visits to see

these children to ascertain their views and to assess their risks are made promptly, often on the day of the strategy meeting. Records of strategy meetings show that risks and concerns are appropriately considered and analysed. Decisions and follow-up actions are now more in line with agreed practice standards and ensure that children are appropriately safeguarded and supported.

19. The quality and purposefulness of assessments, while not yet consistently good, are improving. More recent assessments are stronger and evidence the effective engagement of children, they are sensitive to culture and identity, and include parents and members of the wider family in the process. However, fathers' roles, particularly the impact of absent fathers or fathers in families affected by domestic abuse, are not consistently considered or fully understood.
20. In some cases, children who require specialist or parenting assessments wait too long for these assessments to take place. A small number of these children have not had their placement needs sufficiently assessed. A small number of these children have not had their placement needs sufficiently assessed, and this has resulted in a smaller number of these children experiencing delays in decisions being made about who they will live with long term.
21. Most children have meaningful relationships with social workers. Social workers visit children frequently and they sensitively conduct direct work with them, using a range of age-appropriate tools to ascertain the children's wishes and feelings. Children's views are used effectively to inform assessments and planning. Some social workers are tenacious and successfully engage with disaffected or resistant parents, supporting them to more effectively contribute to plans for their children. However, frequent changes in social workers mean that some parents find it difficult to maintain a trusting relationship with social workers.
22. The quality of the support offered to disabled children and their families has significantly improved since the last inspection. Whole-family working practices ensure that the needs of all family members are well considered. Sensitive, child-focused social work practice, combined with sophisticated packages of support, enable many children to successfully remain with their families. However, transition arrangements are under review to improve disabled young people's move into adulthood.
23. There is increasing evidence of management oversight of children's case files. However, this is not yet consistent or effective in improving practice or progressing all children's plans. Gaps in management oversight have led to some missed opportunities to intervene earlier, and some premature decisions to close children's cases before sustainable change is achieved. More recent work shows that managers, supported by child protection chairs and child sexual exploitation and missing co-ordinators, are beginning to more effectively challenge the quality of practice. (recommendation)

24. Decisions to make children subject to child protection plans are appropriate, and emerging action plans are reflective of risks and concerns. Most child protection conferences are well managed and parents are well supported to participate in these meetings. However, there is no formal advocacy support arrangements for children, and, subsequently, very few children attend their conferences. Children's views are usually well represented by their social workers in these meetings. Child protection chairs increasingly monitor children's progress, both in meetings and through scrutiny of case records, appropriately escalating limited progression of plans. (recommendation)
25. Most child protection and child in need plans require improvement. Delays are evident in both the development and the implementation of plans. A lack of contingency planning impacts negatively on many children; the consequences of poor, sometimes reactionary or crisis planning. More recent plans have a clearer purpose, balance, and a greater focus on support and access to services.
26. The management of allegations against professionals is robust and effective, protecting most children through proportionate responses to concerns and allegations. Proactive awareness raising and training activities ensure that agencies appropriately and regularly consult the designated officer, leading to effective responses to concerns. Records of strategy meetings are comprehensive, include clear rationale for decisions and set specific actions which are diligently followed up by the designated officer.
27. Practice in identifying and supporting children who are privately fostered has improved following an audit and action plan in 2017. Social work assessments make clear carers' capacity to meet the needs of children and visits are timely. Close joint working between social workers and school pastoral staff strengthens the oversight and support provided to these children.
28. The response to children who go missing is improving. Return home interviews, while not always timely, when conducted are detailed and offer insight into children's activities. When children are missing for extended periods, appropriate consideration is given to the use of publicity. Strategy meetings are convened and concerns are appropriately escalated to senior managers when necessary. Arrangements to track children missing education and to ensure the welfare of children who are electively home educated are in place and are effective.
29. Responses to child sexual exploitation and those children who go missing are now better co-ordinated. All reports of children missing, arrests and other intelligence regarding victims and perpetrators are reviewed with partners on a daily basis. The child sexual exploitation and missing co-ordinators provide an effective link in this work, updating both social workers and key partners. Intelligence is used appropriately to better understand children's behaviours and associates. Strategy meetings make effective plans to protect and disrupt this behaviour.

30. More recently, young people presenting high risk are appropriately considered within a contextual safeguarding framework and are made subject to a 'young people's safety plan' (YPSP). Inspectors saw emerging evidence that these plans are effective in supporting and diverting girls and young women from child sexual exploitation, and improved multi-agency working is having a positive impact on disrupting activities of perpetrators. However, there is limited evidence that YPSPs and social work involvement has been effective or is making any tangible difference in improving the life chances of those involved in entrenched criminal or gang activity. (recommendation)
31. The integrated 'young people's pathway' for 16- and 17-year-olds at risk of homelessness is starting to improve the offer of mediation with families and the provision of emergency accommodation. However, services for this group of young people are underdeveloped. Homeless young people do not routinely have their needs or vulnerabilities fully explored and only a few assessments are carried out. Young people are not currently supported with information or access to independent advice about their rights and entitlements. (recommendation)
32. Destitute families with no recourse to public funds receive timely support from a multi-agency team, with a focus on working with the Home Office to resolve immigration issues as quickly as possible. Local emergency accommodation is offered to families, although the quality of this accommodation is variable. Effective joint working with housing officers means that families do not fall through gaps in the housing system when there is a change in immigration status.
33. The multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) arrangements are efficiently managed, with a wide range of highly committed agencies participating. Support for families affected by domestic abuse remains a high priority for the authority. Social care is represented at these meetings by a senior manager, and social workers routinely attend to discuss individual children. Children's records are promptly updated with actions from the MARAC, informing assessments and safety plans.

<b>The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence</b>	<b>Requires improvement to be good</b>
<p>Services for children looked after in Lambeth have improved since the last inspection in 2015 and they are no longer inadequate. However, some areas still require improvement to ensure that all children looked after have the best opportunities to reach their full potential.</p> <p>The majority of children looked after in Lambeth are kept safe, and decisions that children should be looked after are mostly timely and appropriate. When a child returns home from care, effective multi-agency support plans help to make the transition successful. The majority of children live in stable homes which meet their needs well. Social workers take time to listen to children, and help them to maintain contact with their families when this is in their best interests. Not enough children are benefiting from the support of an independent visitor or advocate.</p> <p>Improved management oversight is helping to ensure that plans now progress for children who cannot return home. However, there still remains a lack of urgency in securing permanence for too many children. Parallel planning is not always happening at the pre-proceeding stage. Too many children living in long-term foster homes are waiting too long to have their plans ratified and confirmed.</p> <p>A lack of suitable placements for children with complex needs, and those assessed to be at high risk, means that, in an emergency, too many children are being held in custody overnight. Processes for responding to these children and assessing their needs are underdeveloped.</p> <p>Proactive action by the local authority is beginning to ensure that children's health needs are promptly assessed when they come into care. Oversight of children looked after who have substance misuse difficulties is insufficiently co-ordinated to ensure that these children are adequately helped and supported.</p> <p>The majority of young people leaving care get the support and help that they need, but some young people with more acute needs and those who are not in education, employment or training would benefit from more enhanced support. Staff build positive and trusting relationships with young people over time, work well with other agencies and provide timely and practical help. The views of children, young people and care leavers are integral to service planning.</p> <p>Adoption performance remains inadequate. Children who should be adopted are waiting too long. The local authority has not been proactive in recruiting adopters to ensure that there is a sufficient range of placement choice to meet local need. Completion of life-story work is too inconsistent and recent improvements reflecting positive work is not yet embedded.</p>	



## Inspection findings

34. Decisions about children coming into care are appropriate but, in a minority of cases, practice was less decisive and action could have been taken sooner to safeguard children and progress permanence plans.
35. Since the last inspection, the local authority has put more effective systems in place in relation to pre-proceedings. This is improving outcomes for children. A public law outline tracker and fortnightly tracking meetings provide an appropriate level of oversight to monitor the progress of cases. However, very early parallel permanence planning is not as focused as it should be. For example, family group conferences and viability assessments are not routinely occurring alongside parenting and specialist assessments to inform planning and prevent delay for children. Once the need is identified, the quality of viability assessments of family members is generally good.
36. Once initiated, care proceedings progress promptly and, on average, are well within the 26-week threshold. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary report improvement in the quality of evidence and plans provided to the court, resulting in fewer delays and better outcomes for children.
37. Social workers complete connected persons assessments within agreed timescales and they are generally of a good quality. Special guardianship as a permanence option is appropriately considered. Most assessments of special guardians are detailed. However, the majority of special guardianship support plans lack sufficient detail about who will complete life-story work with children to help them understand why they are not living with their birth parents.  
(recommendation)
38. Children do not return home from care unless it is safe for them to do so. On discharge, effective, and regularly reviewed multi-agency child protection or child in need plans, based on detailed assessment, help to ensure that the placement back home remains safe and stable.
39. Children looked after are visited regularly and are seen alone by social workers who have manageable caseloads. Some creative and imaginative direct work with children informs assessments and plans. However, long-standing problems in staff continuity has meant that some children have struggled to develop trusting, meaningful relationships with their social workers and independent reviewing officers. A recent drive to promote life-story work is helping some children to better understand their life histories. This improving practice now needs embedding.
40. Overall, most children are settled where they are living, with committed carers who provide good stability and support. They are able to live with their brothers and sisters when this is appropriate and when not, contact arrangements are well considered. Regular review helps to ensure that family contact takes place

at the right level and frequency. It takes account of children's wishes and feelings and the need for them to see each other, and ensures that contact is a safe and positive experience. Children are encouraged to pursue their hobbies and interests and benefit greatly from free access to leisure facilities within the borough.

41. A minority of children looked after live a long way from their home community and, in most cases, they are not disadvantaged by this. In fact, in several cases, carefully considered decisions to place children at a distance from Lambeth led to them being safer and achieving better outcomes.
42. The quality of assessments for children looked after, including a significant number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and care plans, is mostly satisfactory. In better assessments and plans, sensitive consideration is given to ethnicity, language and culture, and responses to specific needs are evident. In poorer examples, assessments and plans are not up to date or specific enough. Some lack contingency plans, especially where children's circumstances are relatively uncertain, for example unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are awaiting the outcome of age assessment.
43. When children move to live with new carers, appropriate information is usually shared to help ensure that carers are equipped to meet children's specific needs. However, staff do not routinely consider and record delegation of authority. This needs to be considered more clearly and regularly to enable carers to be confident in making day-to-day decisions so that children looked after can live as normal a life as possible.
44. There is a lack of urgency in securing permanence for some children. Managers do not always exercise enough authority to ensure that plans progress. Too many children in long-term foster homes are waiting for their placements to be confirmed and ratified. This causes them uncertainty about their futures. (recommendation)
45. Recruitment of foster carers for children with complex needs and challenging behaviours continues to be a challenge, particularly where children need to be looked after in an emergency. This has resulted in too many children being held in police stations overnight. This can be a confusing and traumatic experience for them. A more effective process for assessing and responding to children placed in custody, particularly outside core hours, is required to ensure that children are not detained unnecessarily. (recommendation)
46. Since the last inspection, improved strategic and operational arrangements for children looked after who go missing or who are at risk of sexual exploitation are reducing risk for many of this vulnerable group. However, not enough children are offered or take up return home interviews. As a result, on too many occasions there are missed opportunities to engage with these children in order to gather information to reduce risk. Similarly, operational practice relating to children looked after at risk of gang and criminal exploitation is not

consistent and it is not yet sufficiently identifying and reducing levels of risk for some young people.

47. The independent reviewing officers (IROs) have recently become a more stable team, with manageable caseloads as a result of increased capacity. This has resulted in more effective oversight and progression of care plans. IROs are becoming more confident in raising practice alerts when children's plans and review actions do not progress. Managers of this service are aware and are working to ensure that when IROs raise concerns, actions are followed through more promptly to improve practice and outcomes for children.
48. Although the picture is improving for some children, too many children coming in to care do not have their initial health assessments soon enough. Consequently, some do not have their health needs fully assessed to inform their placement. This causes delay in identifying the most suitable home for some children. Actions to address this are underway, but it is too soon to see the impact of this.
49. The co-located child and adolescent mental health service for children looked after provides accessible, timely and flexible support for children and their carers to meet children's emotional health needs. A new joint sexual health and substance misuse service has recently been commissioned for children looked after. It is too early to know what impact this is having on children. Senior leaders acknowledge that they do not have sufficient oversight of children looked after who have substance misuse difficulties. As a result, they cannot be assured that children receive the right help at the right time to address these issues. (recommendation)
50. Foster carers are generally positive about the training and support they receive. Supervisory visits are timely, effective and well recorded. This helps foster carers to understand and respond appropriately to children. The fostering panel is effective and contributes well to service development.
51. The virtual school team knows children well and carefully monitors their progress. Staff use the pupil premium grant imaginatively to support children's attendance and progress. This is done in such ways as funding for art therapy, educational visits, transport to school, and one-to-one academic and mentoring support.
52. The attainment of children who take tests and examinations is good. Children looked after make good progress from their starting points, particularly those aged between 11 and 16. At key stage 2 and key stage 4, children and young people achieve well, with a comparatively high proportion achieving good grades in their English and mathematics GCSEs. Most young people are supported to make a successful transition into further education and training, although for many this does not continue once they have left care.

53. The large majority of children and young people have an up-to-date, good quality personal education plan. The virtual school is persistent in its efforts to secure appropriate education for children looked after who are missing from education, including those who are persistently absent from school.
54. Staff are working at full capacity and the virtual school team has unfilled vacancies. This means that existing staff are struggling to extend support to all those who need it, such as those aged over 16.
55. Children looked after have access to advocacy and independent visitors. However, take up of these services is low. Senior leaders are aware that these valuable services need to be better considered and promoted so that a greater number of children benefit from them.
56. Children's views are integral to service planning. The children in care council 'Vision of success' group works productively with senior corporate parents to raise issues important to children looked after and care leavers. Supported by a newly appointed participation worker, young people now sit on the fostering and adoption panel and are involved in staff recruitment. Plans are underway to increase the numbers of children involved with the 'Vision of success', including helping disabled children and children living out of the area, to access the group. Children and young people spoken to during the inspection were proud to be the voice of children in Lambeth.

<b>The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is Inadequate</b>
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57. Permanence through adoption is not considered early enough or with sufficient urgency for all relevant children in Lambeth. While some progress has been made in recent months, the systems for the early identification of children who may benefit from concurrent planning and foster-to-adopt placements are still in the very early stages of development. This compromises the local authority's efforts to secure timely permanence through adoption where it is appropriate.
58. The permanence tracker used to monitor and review the progress of permanence plans is limited and does not sufficiently include consideration of all permanence options, including adoption. Consequently, planning for permanence and family finding does not commence quickly enough for children whose plan is adoption. (recommendation)
59. During the period from 2014 to 2017, there was little improvement in the timeliness of adoption performance, and it fell significantly short of the DfE threshold and England average. For the period 2017 to 2018, there has been some improvement made, but the timeliness of adoption performance remains significantly below both thresholds. Not only were a low number of children adopted, seven since the 1st of April 2017, but the timeliness of adoption

remains poor. The quality of adoption data is unreliable, and this undermines confidence and limits its usefulness.

60. Most children subject to placement orders have not yet achieved permanence, although the majority of these children have been matched and placed. Most of these children have experienced significant drift and delay. The failure to progress some children's plans for adoption since the last inspection was avoidable and reflects poor management oversight and decision-making. The impact of delay on the lived experiences of too many children is not fully considered or known. This has resulted in some children still waiting to be adopted by a family beyond timescales that are in their best interests and that meet their needs.
61. Some features of the systemic weaknesses identified at the last inspection around drift and delay are still prevalent in adoption cases. Inspection findings highlight that, when concerns have been raised about the suitability of adoptive placements, the local authority's response has been poor. In some instances, practice and management oversight was not sufficiently child centred and the rationale as to why a particular adopter best met a child's long-term needs was not clearly recorded in their records. The rationale for decisions taken was not demonstrated.
62. Inspectors saw some recent improved practice, including sensitive work with birth parents who were considering relinquishing their child for adoption and the active pursuit of adoption for children who have health and behaviour problems. Recently proactive efforts and family finding has kept brothers and sisters together, but this is not embedded practice. The authority regularly uses adoption publications to promote profiles of children and appropriately refers children waiting to be adopted and details of approved adopters waiting to be matched with a child to the adoption register.
63. The local authority has not been sufficiently active in adopter recruitment, including for children from black and minority ethnic communities and children over the age of two. Until recently, there has been inertia on the part of the local authority in increasing the range of adopters. There is often delay of up to six months in responding to adoption enquiries and commencing adopter assessments. This does not support the timely identification of adopters, and could discourage some applicants. The local authority has designed a new website as part of its adopter recruitment approach, and this is due to launch in March 2018. There is currently a review of how best to deliver adopter recruitment prior to the pan-London regional adoption agency 'Adopt London' going live in April 2019. (recommendation)
64. The overall quality of prospective adopter reports (PARs) is satisfactory. The better PARs are comprehensive and effectively set out the suitability of prospective adopters to meet the needs of children. Overall, adopters who spoke with inspectors were positive about their experience of the assessment process, which they described as thorough and sensitively carried out once it

started. The quality of child permanence reports are mostly satisfactory but some are not suitably child-centred.

65. The fostering and adoption panel is properly organised, and includes a medical and legal adviser, administrator and independent members. It also benefits from an experienced adoption adviser. It is chaired by an experienced independent chair and provides regular reports on the activity of the panel. Panel recommendations are ratified by the agency decision-maker (ADM), who gives clear and detailed rationale for decisions made. Appraisals on members are carried out, and strategic leaders, including the strategic director and ADM, observe panel work. Membership has been strengthened, including the contribution of a young person, who participates and contributes to adoption work and provides feedback on children's experiences. This is a marked improvement since the last inspection.
66. The completion of life-story work is not consistent or sufficiently prioritised. This has been a long-standing area of practice where further development is needed. The small sample of life-story work seen by inspectors, however, reflects work that is well presented, detailed and sensitively compiled, taking into account the views of children and birth parents. This enables adopters to help children understand their early life experiences and to support the family to move forward. (recommendation)
67. Post-adoption support is a strength. Lambeth local authority provides a high level of support, both direct and indirect, to those for whom adoption features in their life and those in special guardianship placements. Adoptive parents spoke highly of the post-adoption support provided, including long-standing support and access to therapeutic input for their children. There is a wide range of services to support adopters, birth parents and adopted adults, which is valued by families, and take up is high.

**The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it requires improvement to be good**

68. The quality of support that young people leaving care receive is not consistently good. While most young people get the help they need to become more independent, ensure that they are safe, and make progress in their lives, a significant minority do not. Too many young people experience delays in getting the help they need. Staff are too reliant on young people taking responsibility for themselves without giving them the practical help and support to achieve their goals.
69. Most personal advisers and social workers know young people on their caseloads well and maintain regular contact with them. Staff often act as effective advocates for young people, for example when they have problems with their benefits or education. Staff work hard to engage young people who are reluctant to seek help or become disengaged through, for example, contact

with the probation service. Young people spoken to by inspectors highly valued their relationships with their personal advisers.

70. Despite well-conceived corporate initiatives, such as the industrial cadets work experience programme, the proportion of young people leaving care who are NEET is too high. At the time of the inspection, this represented half of all 19- to 21-year-olds. Not enough plans to address young people's education, training and employment needs are specific enough, and action to move them into work and training lacks urgency. As a result, young people are waiting too long for an education or training place, or a job. (recommendation)
71. A dedicated worker in the 'steps to success' programme adds welcome capacity to support care leavers into education, employment and training. Practical support over time to help young people prepare for interviews and to develop their curriculum vitae meets the needs of those who engage well. There is good support, including financial help for those who wish to progress to higher education, and a good proportion of care leavers currently attend university.
72. Young people are aware of their rights and entitlements, such as the setting up home allowance so that they can furnish their first home. The financial help offered supports young people well by, for example, covering their travel costs when they start a job and are awaiting their first pay packet or to meet their housing costs pending the receipt of universal credit payment.
73. Staff do not engage effectively with enough of those young people who are at high risk of not achieving well, such as those with an offending history, those who are gang affiliated or those who have come into care after serving a custodial sentence. Too often staff unsuccessfully refer young people to other specialist agencies for help. Young people do not attend these appointments and subsequently miss out on the help available. Too many care leavers are in custody. Managers have not developed a suitable strategy to help staff better engage young people in this high-risk group.
74. Not enough young people have their pathway plans updated to reflect their changing circumstances. This is particularly the case for those care leavers who receive support from social workers in the children looked after teams. Typically, pathway plans address the key aspects of young people's lives and the risks and barriers that they face. However, action to address their needs places too much emphasis on young people themselves having to complete the identified actions.
75. The large majority of young people live in safe and suitable accommodation. There is a good range available to young people. However, managers do not always sufficiently consider the safety of all those returning to Lambeth to live independently. Inspectors saw some examples where care leavers who have grown up out of the area for their own safety secure their first tenancy in neighbourhoods where it is not safe for them to live. This results in further

unnecessary moves and disrupts young people's progress towards independence.

76. Where young people live with their former foster carers under staying put arrangements, this familiar and stable environment provides a solid foundation for them to build the skills they need to live independently and achieve their aspirations. When young people need housing in an emergency, managers place them with existing providers and do not use bed and breakfast accommodation.
77. Most young people receive good support that builds their capacity well to manage themselves with growing independence. This includes saving, budgeting and managing their own tenancy. Young people who complete the 'what happens next' course to prepare them to manage their own home successfully sustain their first tenancy. One large local housing provider delivers a good range of activities, including cooking, sports and arts, that promote well-being and develop well the skills that young people need to live independently.
78. The majority of young people have their basic health needs met and are registered with a local doctor and dentist. Pathway plans often contain good information on young people's health needs and the steps they need to take to maintain good health. While young people receive a copy of their health history at their last health check as a child looked after, this is a recent development and has only been received by a small proportion of all care leavers.



Leadership, management and governance	Requires improvement to be good
<p>There is strong political and corporate support for children's services in Lambeth. There has been sustained commitment, including significant financial investment, from leaders and senior managers to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families. The pace of improvement, after early challenges which resulted in further deterioration in performance since the 2015 inspection, has accelerated in the last 18 months. However, leaders and managers are realistic and recognise that recent progress remains fragile.</p> <p>A cohesive quality assurance framework has supported improvement in a number of service areas such as planning for children at risk of significant harm and the provision of services for disabled children and their families. This integrated approach has been effective in targeting areas of previous weaker practice, such as decision-making at the front door and child protection planning.</p> <p>However, performance management information requires further development to ensure that data is accurate and can measure progress against outcomes for children alongside data about compliance. Inaccurate performance information has resulted in limited strategic attention, and little progress has been made in some areas since the last inspection.</p> <p>Elected members of the corporate parenting board demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the life chances of children looked after or leaving care. A revitalised children in care council has been able to influence policy changes around children's savings accounts and council tax exemptions for care leavers.</p> <p>A successful workforce strategy has been instrumental in reducing caseloads and improving the numbers of permanent staff. The turnover of social workers has significantly reduced since 2015, but many children and their carers still experience several changes of social worker, making it harder for them to form trusting relationships.</p> <p>Supervision and management oversight is improving, but is not yet strong enough across all teams. In a number of cases seen by inspectors, actions are not being tracked, and plans are allowed to drift without things getting better for children.</p> <p>The authority's 'Children at the heart of practice' framework is starting to improve child-centred practice, supported by social workers' access to regular group supervision and practice forums. Direct work with children is routinely contributing to assessments of their needs, and social workers are tenacious in most cases in engaging with hard-to-reach families.</p>	

## Inspection findings

79. Following a period of instability immediately after the previous inspection in 2015, the pace of improvement accelerated with the appointment of the current senior leadership team in 2016. An infrastructure for improvement activity has been building from the ground up. Progress has been evident in the majority of monitoring visits conducted by Ofsted, although significant improvements are much more recent. This re-inspection has confirmed that, while most children are effectively safeguarded, the pace of improvement and quality of practice remain uneven across teams.
80. There has been shared responsibility for improvement through a multi-agency improvement board. Senior leaders are supported by strong corporate and political commitment to children's services, for example the assurance by cabinet to continue to fund current staffing levels. Scrutiny by members is regular and robust, with specific consideration given to the needs of black and ethnic minority children and families in Lambeth. However, discussions are not always informed by accurate performance information, so lack of progress is not always clearly identified.
81. The authority's self-assessment demonstrates an understanding of strengths and areas for improvement, building on feedback from Ofsted monitoring visits and findings from regular case audits. The majority of areas for further improvement found within this re-inspection had already been prioritised and progressed to some degree.
82. The development of a comprehensive quality assurance and performance framework has enabled a better understanding of compliance and an improvement in the quality of practice across most services. The strategy and performance board brings together performance data and intelligence from audits, practice weeks, complaints and compliance monitoring. This integrated approach has been effective in targeting areas of previous weaker practice, such as decision-making at the front door and child protection planning.
83. Inspectors found a number of deficits in the quality and accuracy of the authority's performance data and therefore this remains an outstanding action from the 2015 inspection. For some groups of children, such as those children awaiting adoption, the use of performance information and target setting has not contributed to improvements. For other groups, too, targets have not been sufficiently ambitious, for example for the numbers of care leavers who are expected to be in employment, education or training. (recommendation)
84. Elected members are passionate, committed corporate parents. The children in care council, 'Visions of success', has grown with the support of a dedicated participation worker. Children told inspectors that they felt listened to by leaders and able to influence decision-making through the corporate parenting

board. This commitment has manifested in practical support, such as improvements to managing savings for children in care, exemptions from council tax for care leavers, and housing support for foster carers holding Lambeth tenancies. However, care leavers would benefit from more opportunities for apprenticeships or work experience available within the council.

85. The vast majority of social workers are positive about working for Lambeth and value the 'relationship-based' practice that the authority is promoting; social workers described feeling more motivated as a result. Leaders are in touch with the frontline and observe practice and talk directly to families during 'practice week'. The strategic director chairs the staff reference group and, alongside the director for social care, meets with all new social workers during their induction.
86. The local authority's development of the principal social worker role, at a senior level, has been influential in building a culture of child-centred, reflective practice. Social workers value access to group supervision, case consultation and coaching from advanced practitioners; inspectors saw cases where this work contributed to better practice and improved outcomes for children.
87. Significant investment has resulted in an increased, permanent social care workforce, with the turnover of social workers having reduced from a very high percentage to a rate lower than the national average. As a result, children are now less likely to have repeated changes of social worker, but the impact of previous changes of social worker remains for some children, who told inspectors they did not feel able to trust their current social worker.
88. Caseloads have significantly reduced over the last 12 months, enabling social workers to spend more time undertaking direct work with children and families, whose views are increasingly being captured within assessments, plans and review meetings.
89. Reviewing officers and conference chairs are using escalations to identify improvements in both compliance and social work practice. However, inspectors found significant gaps in recorded supervision and management oversight provided by some frontline managers. Progress in this area has been too slow.
90. Senior managers have maintained an understanding of young people at high risk, through weekly reviews of cases of concern. Responses to children missing from home and care are improving, with the recent 'missing' coordinator role helping develop a better understanding of episodes of going missing and delivering more co-ordinated interventions. The number of episodes of going missing is static overall, although there are fewer episodes of going missing involving children looked after.
91. The 'young people at risk' multi-agency strategy recognises the need to work differently with children at risk of 'contextual' harm. Improved information sharing and disruption activities co-ordinated jointly with the police have meant

that some children in Lambeth are better protected, especially those children at risk of sexual exploitation. YPSPs are starting to make a difference in a number of cases, particularly for girls.

92. Work with young men at high risk from youth violence and criminal exploitation is effective in only a small number of cases. Improvements are required to provide more specialist interventions, alongside youth offending services that genuinely connect with young men and prevent further harm.  
(recommendation)
93. The integrated commissioning programme is aligned to the key priorities within the new children and young people's plan. This has resulted in a wide range of targeted services for children, such as an extended family nurse partnership offer, and therapeutic support provided in response to domestic abuse. Waiting times for all children to access community clinical mental health services have reduced from 50 weeks, at the time of the previous inspection, to around 15 weeks.
94. Commissioning of placements for older, high-risk children occurs on a case-by-case basis and not as part of a cohesive sufficiency strategy. As a result, the range of emergency placements and placements for young people at high risk of exploitation do not meet the demand, and inspectors saw a small number of children in improvised, ad hoc care arrangements. Joint work between placements and commissioning teams means that children's placements, once established, are relatively stable and well supported.
95. Partnership working is a strength in Lambeth. The local authority has worked hard to build partners' confidence in children's services, with senior managers leading work streams within the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to improve wider safeguarding practice. The strategic director works closely with the chair of the LSCB to help partners of the local authority develop and improve. The successful redesign of the 'front door' for social care and early help was planned in consultation with partners. Local arrangements such as Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) are effective at identifying risks to children.
96. Strategic work across the partnership to identify and support children at risk of radicalisation and female genital mutilation is well co-ordinated. For families presented to the channel panel, multi-agency responses have been timely and proportionate to risk. Girls at risk of female genital mutilation receive cohesive and sensitive services that help to minimise the emotional impact of this abusive practice.
97. There has been some improvement in the timeliness of resolving complaints, and themes taken from complaints are now being used to improve the quality of service delivery. However, feedback is not gathered from users of core services to inform what works for children and families. Independent visiting and advocacy services are not actively promoted and children's take up is low.

Inspectors saw examples of children who would have benefited from the support of an advocate but had not been offered one.

## **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 is 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 inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted and one contracted Ofsted Inspector.

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