

London Borough of Hillingdon

Inspection of local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 16 April to 27 April 2018

Lead inspector: Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Services for children in Hillingdon are good and have significantly improved since the previous inspection in 2013. A child-centred approach is woven into strategic and operational decision-making. The shared determination to improve outcomes for children is demonstrated by an impressive pace of change. This has resulted in services of consistently good quality provided by skilled and highly motivated staff, supported by purposeful corporate investment and commitment. Leaders know their services well and were already aware of and acting on the small number of weaker aspects of the service noted by inspectors.

Children who need help and protection receive a timely service that meets their needs. Comprehensive assessments and high-quality plans enable staff to target intervention effectively so that risks are reduced. Multi-agency working is well developed, and contributes to achieving good outcomes for children.

Children who are in care, and care leavers, receive a good service from staff, who know them well and who genuinely care for them. Children and young people are consistently encouraged to be involved in decisions about their lives and their views have a direct impact on service development.

What needs to improve

- The quality of initial strategy discussions so that all relevant partner information is included in order to inform decision-making.
- The timeliness and quality of return home interviews when children are reported missing from home and care.
- The understanding of children in care regarding their rights to complain and access independent advocacy.
- Timely and effective permanence plans for all children, including those who live permanently in a long-term foster placement.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are good

1. Children and their families benefit from a good early help offer and have access to a broad range of preventive and targeted services. Early help services are integrated into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), resulting in quick decisions to identify the most appropriate help to meet children's needs. Early help referrals are well managed and communication with lead professional partners is good. When children's needs change, effective step-up arrangements to social care mean that children receive a speedy response and the right help at the right time.
2. Partners have a good understanding of thresholds when making referrals, and these are consistently applied for children in need of help and protection. Decisions are timely, with good evidence of management oversight. This streamlined service ensures quick responses to children's needs. The very small number of contacts that fall outside of timescales are monitored and rigorously risk assessed, and include a clear, acceptable rationale by the team manager on the reasons for delay. When concerns for children escalate, multi-agency responses to information requests on referrals are monitored effectively by a visual RAG (red, amber, green) rating system. This ensures that all partners in the MASH know of, and share accountability for, the progress of requests for information.
3. Children receive appropriate support and intervention from an out-of-hours emergency duty team (EDT) service. Subsequent daily handover meetings between the MASH team manager and the EDT service the following morning support a quick and effective response to referrals for children, and this system works well. Information sharing and communication between partners in the MASH, and with police colleagues in particular, help to identify changing levels of risks to children. For example, changes may be made to the RAG rating following police referrals of domestic abuse, resulting in escalation and a review of the intervention required. This is leading to appropriate levels of service.
4. Children and families receive a good, timely response from the referral and assessment service. Children are seen quickly and alone, if appropriate, and their views are listened to. Social workers and managers clearly demonstrate an awareness of the need to ensure that all children and their families have an opportunity to be heard. This is assisted by consistent and appropriate use of interpreters and insightful consideration of the diverse needs of children and their families. Staff demonstrate intelligent understanding of the specific vulnerabilities of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
5. The vast majority of assessments are timely, comprehensive and of good quality. They provide succinct evidence of risks to children and clear analysis, and are updated when children's circumstances change. They are easy to read, and help children and families to understand why professionals have concerns. Some

disabled children do not have an updated assessment or plan that reflects the support services that they receive. This means that there is a missed opportunity to identify their circumstances and needs when they change, for example when children get older. Leaders have responded to this area of identified need by appropriately transferring responsibility for disabled children's services to children's social care.

6. Children assessed to be at risk from living in homes where domestic abuse is happening receive effective interventions to safeguard their welfare. Social workers consistently use risk assessment tools to establish the risks associated with domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence. This information is analysed effectively and is taken into account in children's assessments, resulting in appropriate interventions.
7. Risk assessment tools to help to identify children living in neglectful circumstances have recently been rolled out across the workforce. While the additional benefits of these tools are yet to be seen in practice, social workers identify and respond appropriately to protect children at risk of neglect. Consistent use of a social care model of analysis of risk is effective in identifying areas of risk and strength for children subject to risk of significant harm.
8. When risks to children escalate, the majority of strategy discussions are timely and result in the right actions for children to safeguard their welfare. When the outcome of strategy meetings results in section 47 child protection investigations, clear decisions and the rationale are well recorded. When strategy discussions are reconvened, these include appropriate information sharing with partners on next steps. There is some inconsistency in the timeliness and quality of initial strategy discussions for a few children when existing information from partner agencies is not taken into account. While this does not result in an adverse impact for children, it does reduce workers' ability to identify broader risks to children at the earliest opportunity.
9. Staff take effective action to reduce risks to children who are considered highly vulnerable and at risk of child exploitation. Appropriate intervention to protect children at risk of sexual exploitation and children missing from home, school or care is diligently pursued. Social workers understand the complexity of risks to children and this is given significant consideration and analysis in multi-agency strategy meetings and risk assessments. Child sexual exploitation risk assessments are routinely completed to inform children's safety plans, and these assessments and plans are regularly updated as circumstances change. Co-working with the youth offending service for young people at risk of and subject to criminal exploitation is particularly effective, and due consideration is given to them as potential victims of abuse.
10. When children are missing from education, all reasonable checks are made to help to track and identify their whereabouts, including unannounced home visits. Staff and the children missing education officer work closely with the police,

schools, other local authorities and agencies and are persistent in their efforts to identify children missing education. This work is supported well by a clear policy and clear procedures, and monthly information from schools helps staff to maintain up-to-date knowledge of these children.

11. Staff work effectively to ensure that children who are educated at home receive a suitable education. Staff liaise with families and work hard to form positive relationships with them. Families receive useful information, including access to a dedicated website that includes details on local support groups. If staff have concerns about a child, they escalate these appropriately.
12. Plans for children in need of help and protection are a significant strength and are of excellent quality. Children and their families understand what is expected of them and what needs to change and by when, and plans are continuously updated to reflect children's current situations. Core groups and child in need meetings actively review children's plans in detail, and check whether progress is being made and risks are reducing. This keeps the focus for partner agencies on what needs to change to improve outcomes for children. Family group conferences are used effectively and help with very early identification of extended family and friends as part of the safety plan for children.
13. The children and family keyworker service provides effective interventions that enable families to implement changes that lead to reduced risk for children with child in need or child protection plans. Families have access to parenting support programmes which are held outside of office hours, and learn how to reinforce behaviours to improve routines and boundary setting. This provides workers with an opportunity to really engage with and understand the views of children and families, and helps to inform current and future planning.
14. The vast majority of multi-agency meetings and core groups have appropriate participation by partner agencies, they are child focused and are well chaired by social workers. Recording of core groups by social workers is exceptionally good. Child protection case conferences work well, evidenced by good social work reports, positive engagement by partners and clear decision-making. The voice of children is central to the conference and conferences result in clear plans. Participation and direct work with young people are areas of strength and these help to keep the focus on their views and wishes.
15. The public law outline process is used effectively when children's needs escalate. Staff ensure that families understand the nature of risks to children and know what they need to do to minimise those risks. The vast majority of plans have tight timescales for review and this helps to prevent delays in care planning for children.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers are good

16. When children need to be looked after, they receive effective and sensitive intervention. This includes unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who receive a strong, supportive and quick response to meet their needs. Children who return home from care receive a good level of structured support for as long as they need it and children only return home when it is appropriate for them to do so.
17. Children subject to the public law outline and care proceedings benefit from exceptionally strong intervention work. Children's needs are understood well. Thresholds for care proceedings are applied correctly, assessments and statements are of good quality and care plans are clear. Use of parental agreement to accommodation is appropriately applied. Staff at the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) told inspectors about the high quality of work and the continued improvement in timeliness for children subject to care proceedings, which has resulted in the majority of work now being undertaken in less than 26 weeks. A comprehensive range of viability assessments of family members is undertaken and the standard of these assessments is consistently strong.
18. Social workers know the children very well and genuinely care for them. This is demonstrated in positive summaries in children's records that describe children's strengths, abilities, likes and dislikes, and these bring to life children's experiences and explain why they are in care. Children receive regular visits from their social workers. Direct work is consistently undertaken, not only as part of permanence work, but also to help all children to understand their histories and experiences. This includes sensitive life-story work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Social workers are positive about and ambitious for children, and support them in their interests. Children's contact with their families is planned effectively and managed well.
19. Children's care plans are an area of considerable strength. They are clear, focused on the key areas of need for children and have realistic actions and timescales. Oversight of children's progress by independent reviewing officers (IROs) is good and is recorded in children's records. Statutory reviews and mid-point reviews are held regularly. IROs appropriately challenge and escalate concerns, which result in better planning for children. Children are supported and encouraged to co-chair their own reviews and some opt to do this regularly. Social worker reports for reviews are comprehensive and demonstrate how well social workers know children.
20. Social workers recognise and respond well to children vulnerable to exploitation. This includes identifying interdependencies of risks from sexual exploitation, missing from care, radicalisation and criminal exploitation. Social workers and partners attend strategy meetings that result in effective plans that help to reduce risks and protect children. Leaders are well informed about the children

who go missing or are at risk of going missing. Flexible and creative approaches by social workers demonstrate perseverance to ensure that children are safe.

21. Children's physical, emotional and mental health and well-being are given high priority by staff and senior leaders. This is demonstrated by investment in the provision of an excellent in-house multi-agency psychology service (MAPS). MAPS provides high-quality assessments, group work, training, consultations and one-to-one direct work with children and their carers, resulting in a positive impact, visible across the range of services for children. In addition, children benefit from timely initial and review health assessments, supported by an effective system to follow up on their progress.
22. The virtual school provides effective support for the progress and attainment of children in care. Children in care and care leavers talk positively about the virtual school, which is staffed by an experienced, well-qualified and enthusiastic team. Since the previous inspection, leaders have invested well in the virtual school to improve the quality of help that children in care receive. Staff have a very good knowledge of children and young people's needs and they track and monitor the progress of children in care effectively. When children fall behind, staff act quickly to improve the support available. All personal education plans are of a good quality. The majority of children and young people attend school regularly and make good progress relative to their starting points.
23. The three children in care council subgroups, Talkers, Step Up and Stepping Out, meet with senior managers and this ensures that their concerns and views are heard directly by decision-makers. They are an insightful group of children and young people. Managers listen to their views and as a result of concerns raised about frequent changes of social worker, the consistency of social workers for children is improving. However, not all children in care understand their entitlements and their rights to complain or to seek advocacy. The achievements of children and young people are regularly celebrated through the annual Kids in Care Awards, and there is an excellent range of regular enrichment activities in place, funded by the pupil premium plus.
24. The vast majority of children live in suitable and stable homes with their brothers and sisters. When assessments identify that this is not always the best option for children, contact is given high priority and promoted, including for children where adoption is the best permanence option. The fostering team provides the whole fostering family with effective, tailored, flexible support that helps to ensure stability for the children who they care for. When children's needs change and risks escalate, consideration is given to the best suitable resource, including use of secure accommodation, therapeutic and specialist residential children's homes.
25. The majority of children benefit from timely and well-considered options for permanence. The convening of family group conferences at the earliest opportunity supports identification of kinship carers so that children can remain within their families and achieve permanence through special guardianship

orders. Kinship carers and foster carers receive a good level of training and support from an experienced and skilful fostering service. Permanence planning is mostly good, but plans for a small number of children are not sufficiently clear and implementation has been slow. This includes a small number of missed opportunities for foster to adopt and delay in finalising permanence for children living in long-term foster homes. Senior managers are aware of this and have a clear plan to resolve permanence decisions for these children.

26. Adoption as an option for permanence is not considered for a small number of older children. Senior managers recognise and have already activated the plan to address this. Children with a plan for adoption benefit from good matches with adopters, with timeliness gradually improving. Adoption social workers provide adopters with suitable support and training while they are waiting for an appropriate match. The adoption service works well in partnership with other placement authorities for the benefit of children and adopters.
27. Relationships between young people leaving care and their personal advisers are exceptionally strong. Personal advisers are tenacious in their work to engage young people, and make considerable and sustained efforts to see them regularly. Personal advisers complete pathway plans with young people and some care leavers are currently writing their own, as part of a pilot scheme. Pathway plans are of consistently good quality and provide achievable targets and actions. Care leavers benefit from the creativity of workers in identifying, promoting and arranging education, employment and training opportunities. When inspectors met with a group of young people in care, one young person described their personal adviser as 'amazing'.
28. Local data indicates that currently 74% of care leavers are in education, employment and training. A panel is in place where education providers come together to explore options for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). While this is early in development, it is showing encouraging signs of success. The virtual school has good programmes that promote young people's aspirations and attendance at university. Those at university benefit from having their accommodation paid for during the summer break.
29. The vast majority of young people leaving care benefit from a good range of accommodation. When there is a choice of accommodation available, young people are encouraged by their personal advisers and supported to consider the option that is right for them. Personal advisers strongly advocate for young people's rights and entitlements and the virtual school provides appropriate information, advice and guidance to staff for care leavers over 18 years old.
30. Leaders have good ambition for care leavers and children in care. Almost 400 young people who have left care and are aged over 21 have been informed about the support available. Investment has been made into additional staffing, to help to support expected demand. This approach promotes a positive culture

in which individual children's needs are at the forefront of everything workers aspire to achieve. Children and young people are valued and feel valued and this is the ethos across the local authority.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families is outstanding

31. Leaders in Hillingdon have made significant progress in improving the quality of services to children since the previous inspection. Their determination to strive constantly for improvement and their openness to learning has driven successful change at a rapid pace. The dedicated and knowledgeable leadership team models a child-centred approach to all strategic and operational interventions for children and this is replicated throughout the staff group. Relationships with partners are mature and thresholds are well understood. A culture of openness and a commitment to have children at the heart of decision-making ensure that children have consistently good services.
32. Senior managers are held to account through a clear governance structure. Senior leaders and team managers' oversight of weekly performance information and scorecards enables a good understanding of performance, with corrective action taken swiftly when necessary. A revised quality assurance framework, launched in September 2017, and learning from the implementation of themed case management audits have shown positive impact for children. This includes, for example, the creation of a NEET panel to improve opportunities for young people, and appropriate escalation to legal planning meetings for a small number of children identified as being on child in need and child protection plans for too long.
33. The willingness and curiosity to constantly learn from new ideas result in positive outcomes for children. Leaders have implemented actions quickly and effectively following external peer review and the Hillingdon Safeguarding Children Board diagnostic.
34. The senior management oversight provided by the Hillingdon access to resources panel (HARP) is particularly impressive. The panel appropriately considers a broad range of service requests to meet children's needs, for example escalation to legal planning meetings and additional funding to support therapeutic intervention for children with complex needs. Audit activity to establish the effectiveness of the panel between October and December 2017 identified accurately that children had improved outcomes and that decisions were implemented swiftly.
35. The commissioning of MAPS demonstrates a considerable investment from leaders that is highly valued by staff and carers. It offers an excellent range of high-quality support and intervention for children, their carers, adopters, special guardians and social workers across all services. Senior managers demonstrate a

common sense and flexible approach to provision of this service, with intervention for children decided on need, reinforcing a needs-led approach to service delivery.

36. Leaders have an excellent understanding of children at risk of exploitation, including those reported as missing from home, school and care. A quarterly performance report on missing children ensures that senior managers have oversight of patterns of behaviour for those children considered in greatest need or who are most at risk. Plans to further improve strategic oversight with the creation of the vulnerable young people risk management group and commissioning activity are in development, following identification that the quality and timeliness of return home interviews for some children need to improve. The response to protect children at risk of exploitation is good. However, leaders recognised a need to improve their strategic approach to child exploitation and this is in progress.
37. Investment in the education of children in care is a priority for leaders. Children recognise this and they benefit from good quality personal education plans and effective use of the pupil premium. Senior leaders and the corporate parenting board have regular contact and meetings with children, including representatives of the children in care council. Children report positively on changes that happen because of their feedback.
38. The determination of leaders to improving outcomes for children is evidenced by the view of the judiciary, which is impressed by the speed of change and the improved quality of practice for children in care proceedings. Significant improvements can be seen in achieving permanence and adoption for children. However, some small inconsistencies in practice remain. Work still needs to be done to ensure an agreed set of standards that all practitioners understand and apply for each child. An example of this is the upper age at which adoption would be considered a suitable plan for a child. Leaders are already progressing this.
39. Staff are tenacious, skilled and thoughtful, showing a strong commitment to the delivery of good services to children. Staff feel supported and report that managers and leaders are easily accessible and approachable. Social workers appreciate the opportunity to continually develop and progress in their careers and are supported to do so. This transparent culture and the creative environment help staff to recognise challenge as a positive step for improvement. The workforce strategy is effective, resulting in increased numbers of permanent staff, which means that children have fewer changes of social worker.
40. Staff report, and inspectors found, that they have manageable caseloads and leaders have worked extremely hard to ensure that social workers maintain a consistent relationship with children. While supervision of frontline practice is not always consistently recorded in children's records, the vast majority of work with children receives effective frontline management oversight.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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