

London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 September 2019 to 13 September 2019

**Lead inspector: Tara Geere
Her Majesty's Inspector**

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
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

Since the last inspection, in 2016, the local authority has disaggregated most social care services for children from the joint arrangements with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster, although some shared services remain. The newly established senior leadership team, with good support from corporate and political leaders, has focused on sustaining and improving the quality of work with children and families. As a result, direct work with children is strong and the overall experiences of children and their families in receipt of services continue to be good.

Services have been successfully redesigned following internal and external reviews, and have benefited from significant investment. Leaders know their services well and are actively tackling areas that need further improvement, such as the quality of performance data and the consistency of services offered to children in need of help and protection, as well as those in private fostering arrangements. Capacity has been increased in the contact and assessment service. However, caseloads remain high. In addition, capacity issues within the early help service are resulting in some delays to the provision of support to children and their families.

Strong and effective partnerships have been maintained with partner agencies.

What needs to improve

- Capacity within the early help and contact and assessment services.
- The quality of planning for children in need.
- Consistency of multi-agency information-sharing and participation at strategy discussions.
- Case recording, including supervision records and robust recording of the management of allegations.
- The availability of robust performance data.

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

1. The disaggregation in April 2018 of the tri-borough arrangements with Westminster City Council and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has led to the development of a range of new services in Hammersmith and Fulham, as well as some retained shared services.
2. The disaggregation of the early help arrangements has led to the creation of a family support service, provided by an independent local authority trading company. The service is closely overseen by a management board. Capacity issues within the service had already been identified before the inspection and are being carefully monitored, as some children are experiencing delays in receiving support. An effective triage system ensures that cases are risk-assessed and monitored while they wait to be allocated.
3. Once allocated within family support, child-focused early help assessments, fully informed by children's experiences, wishes and feelings, result in effective plans to support change and improve children's circumstances.
4. An effective model of systemic practice is fully embedded across all services. Staff have a clear understanding of the model. They develop strong relationships with children and families to help them to build on the family's strengths and quickly identify strategies to achieve and sustain positive changes and improve children's experiences.
5. Work with partner agencies is strong. Thresholds are well understood and applied effectively in both the initial contact and advice team (ICAT), which acts as the 'front door', and the highly effective multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which is shared with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster. In the MASH, proportionate checks are undertaken with co-located professionals, who

work closely together and collaborate very well. Consent from families or carers is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden. Rigorous management oversight in both the ICAT and the MASH ensures clear and appropriate decision-making regarding next steps to support and safeguard children.

6. Children receive effective support and intervention from the shared out-of-hours emergency duty team. On-call management support is good, with consistent and appropriate decision-making, in accordance with the level of risk. This has improved since the last inspection.
7. When children's needs escalate, timely child protection enquiries take place. However, strategy discussions do not always include all relevant partner agencies. The large majority of strategy discussions are telephone conversations between the police and children's social care. While workers endeavour to make contact and gather information from relevant partners, the absence of some partner agencies at strategy discussions, particularly health agencies, limits the ability of participants to consider family histories and to undertake effective analysis of risk and inform decision-making. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to improve participation at these discussions.
8. The majority of work with children is informed by timely child and family assessments of their needs. Children are seen and seen alone to inform the assessments. Increasing use of chronologies is improving analysis, leading to stronger plans.
9. Children subject to child protection planning have their needs regularly reassessed and updated. Social work reports submitted to child protection conferences are well considered, and records demonstrate effective multi-agency information-sharing. However, the service is less consistent for children in need, and this is affected by high caseloads in the contact and assessment service. A small number of cases included an over-optimistic assessment of parenting capacity, based on the perceived cooperation of parents, despite a significant history of non-compliance. Managers were already aware of the need to strengthen children in need planning and they are beginning to take appropriate action to ensure that plans target the needs of individual children effectively.
10. Social workers know their children well. Direct work with children and families is a strength and is consistently taken into account in assessments and plans. This has led to improved outcomes for children and their families. However, children's wishes and feelings are not always evidenced well in case records.
11. Managers have recognised that case recording is not yet consistent and does not always reflect the quality of practice being undertaken. Chronologies are improving, following recent workshops, but supervision records are variable, and do not always do justice to the quality of supervision reported by social workers.

12. Disabled children benefit from a wide range of specialist services to meet their complex needs, and their outcomes improve as a result. Safeguarding concerns are quickly identified and acted on, and the vast majority of children are protected from harm in a timely manner. Workers use creative methods of communication to work with children effectively. However, senior leaders acknowledge that there is more work to do to use the expertise of partners, such as the local special schools, to improve communication further.
13. Children at risk as a result of exploitation outside of the family home benefit from highly effective responses. Specialist professionals, together with a wide range of shared services, help to engage children and young people in a focused and coordinated way to limit and reduce the risks of going missing, criminal and sexual exploitation and gang involvement.
14. Gangs and multi-agency criminal exploitation (G-MACE) meetings across the three boroughs, and strategy discussions regarding children who go missing, are used well to coordinate and plan interventions for children most at risk. Children and young people receive timely return home interviews. The learning from these is used well to inform future interventions and disruption activity.
15. Sophisticated mapping of young people at high risk is collated well and reported to senior managers on a monthly basis. The mapping leads to clear identification of the most vulnerable children and informs effective strategies. The recent introduction of a safeguarding adolescents at risk panel (SARP), to merge all panels into one comprehensive multi-agency panel, is at an early stage. The panel reviews children who are of most concern and who have increased risk factors. However, it is too early to see the impact of the new arrangements.
16. Currently, there is only one known private fostering arrangement in Hammersmith and Fulham. Managers are aware that there is more work to do to raise awareness with partners and to improve the timeliness of initial visits and support to children. They have recently recruited a private fostering worker to lead this work and have an appropriate action plan to improve practice.
17. Young people who are aged 16 and 17 and at risk of homelessness receive timely and effective support. Temporary accommodation is available as required, to allow time to assess their longer-term needs. Appropriate assessments are undertaken with young people and their families, with a focus on returning home if it is safe and in their best interests. Young people are supported well to understand their rights and entitlements to come into care and to make informed decisions.
18. The management of allegations and concerns against adults is timely and proportionate. However, recording is not consistently robust. Leaders took immediate action to review the arrangements during the inspection, putting in an appropriate plan to address improvements.

19. Effective systems are in place to engage with parents who educate their children at home, and to ensure that the welfare of children who are electively home educated is monitored, including referrals to the ICAT if necessary.
20. Effective services work together to minimise and monitor the risks to children and young people who are out of education. A high proportion of children and young people return to education within 12 weeks of leaders being notified that they are missing from education.

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

21. Pre-proceedings activity under the public law outline is resulting in effective work with children to remain in the care of their families when appropriate. When this is not possible, decisive action is taken, so the vast majority of children come into care in a timely manner. The local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) were both complimentary about the authority's pre-proceedings and care proceedings work.
22. The highly effective 'family assist' and 'looked after children assist' (LAC assist) teams enable children at the edge of care to remain in family arrangements. These services are also successful at reuniting children and young people in care with their families, when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so.
23. The vast majority of children and young people in care benefit from living in a wide range of placement arrangements with their brothers and sisters, if appropriate, and in placements that meet their individual needs. Most children live with carers who provide a good range of activities and opportunities that enable them to enjoy life, celebrate individual achievements and improve their outcomes.
24. When children are placed at some distance from their home, timely notification is made to ensure that host authorities are informed. However, managers are not routinely consulting with the host authorities before children are placed, so that locations can be risk-assessed, and children can receive help and support accordingly.
25. The fostering service, shared across the three boroughs, efficiently recruits potential carers who can meet the needs of individual children. Foster carers are from culturally diverse backgrounds, and there is good evidence of matching regarding ethnicity, language and background. Support for foster carers is a strength of the service. This includes wraparound support services, systemic practice, mentoring and social work support, all of which enhance the quality of children's experiences in their foster homes and help to maintain placement stability.

26. Placement stability is well considered by workers and managers. Concerns are identified effectively and are swiftly responded to. There is a range of additional support, including increased frequency of visits by social workers or input from the LAC assist team, which contributes to children appropriately remaining in their placements. Permanence planning is well considered to ensure that the plans for children meet their needs in a timely way.
27. Some children experience delay between coming into care and entering their adoptive placement, due to appropriate but lengthy and complex care proceedings. Nevertheless, outcomes are good for these children, and the adoption service overall continues to be of very high quality. Adopters have access to a wide range of post-adoption support. Overall, adopters who spoke to inspectors reported positively on the support and training available to them to meet the needs of their children.
28. The highly effective shared connected persons' service completes comprehensive assessments quickly, which facilitates timely moves for children to special guardians or other permanent living arrangements. Children living with connected persons or special guardians benefit from well-crafted support plans, addressing current and potential future needs.
29. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from effective work to ensure that their needs are assessed and responded to. Social workers give good consideration to children's individual needs, including their emotional and physical health. This informs strong assessments, resulting in well-targeted plans and appropriate placements.
30. The appointment of advocates and independent visitors since the last inspection is resulting in a small number of children benefiting from good support and help to share their views and opinions. Leaders are aware of the need to increase the numbers of children who receive this support.
31. Social workers build strong relationships with children in care. Workers visit children regularly, using the embedded practice model to get to know the child and to undertake sensitive direct work. This helps to ensure that all of their needs, including their health needs, are well considered. Children are routinely taken for dental and optician appointments, to ensure that these health needs are met and monitored.
32. Children's emotional health and well-being are well considered and supported effectively by the family assist and LAC assist teams. However, many initial health assessments are not timely, which limits carers' understanding of children's needs. Leaders are aware of this issue and are working with partner agencies to improve processes and timescales for children.
33. Leaders of the virtual school have highly effective processes in place to monitor the education experiences of children in care. They ensure that children's views

are heard in formal review meetings of personal education plans with education and care professionals. Leaders ensure that the support for children in care is tailored towards their individual needs and circumstances, using pupil premium funding effectively to achieve this.

34. Regularly updated children's care plans are routinely monitored by independent reviewing officers (IROs) at timely reviews. Reviews are brought forward appropriately when children's circumstances change. Children are actively encouraged to participate and chair their own meetings, with support. Managers are working to improve mid-review oversight by IROs and the IRO contribution to children's case records.
35. Since the Ofsted focused visit in September 2018, targeted improvements to the delivery of services to care leavers are resulting in more effective responses to young people. Care leavers receive high-quality support from knowledgeable social workers, who have a good understanding of their needs.
36. Care leavers are given very effective support to access education, employment and training opportunities, including an increase in the number of apprenticeships available. Participation of care leavers in higher education continues to be a strength, and leaders are taking appropriate action to further support young people as they move through university.
37. Young people are prepared for independence through good support and training, which continues for care leavers. Social workers are tenacious at keeping in contact with care leavers and are in touch with almost all of them. Managers regularly review cases where young people are not in touch and liaise with partners such as the Home Office where appropriate. Young people who spoke with inspectors were positive about the ongoing support that they receive from the leaving care team. When care leavers become parents, they continue to benefit from personal social work support, even when they become involved in child protection processes.
38. Young people have been active in developing the new pathway plan. Leaders are aware of the need to increase the pace at which they are strengthening young people's involvement in their own pathway planning. Improvements to the health offer have resulted in young people routinely receiving their health histories in order to inform later health decisions. Further work is planned for later in the year to strengthen the health offer for care leavers, with the provision of a dedicated drop-in service with the looked after children nurses.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: good

39. Since the last inspection, the disaggregation of the shared arrangements with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster, has resulted in opportunities to develop new services and processes, with full corporate and political support to meet the needs of children and families in Hammersmith and Fulham. This has resulted in positive developments, for example the family support service, but progress on some other aspects of work has been slow and, as a result, some work, such as the ability to run team-level performance reports, has declined. Senior leaders have appropriate action plans for improvement and are closely monitoring progress.
40. Senior leaders have a good understanding and an accurate self-assessment of their services, supported by their quality assurance framework, although this would be further strengthened by the availability of robust performance data. Leaders acknowledge that performance information systems have taken too long to develop and implement following the disaggregation from the previous reporting arrangements. Further work is required to allow managers to scrutinise performance and target ongoing improvements more precisely.
41. Strong partnership working has continued, both during and following the disaggregation, and has enabled the ongoing shared service arrangements to thrive. Partners spoken to fed back positively on the continued mature, robust relationships and the development of effective new services to safeguard children, such as the ICAT.
42. Since the inspection in 2016 and the local authority children's services focused visit in September 2018 regarding care leavers, targeted work has been undertaken to address the recommendations made. This has resulted in an improvement in services, such as the increased capacity in the shared emergency duty team and improvements to the care leavers' service.
43. Senior leaders have appropriately commissioned external evaluations and undertaken a range of effective deep-dive audits to ensure a focus on performance and the quality of services, while waiting for further development of the performance datasets. The learning from these activities has contributed to a range of appropriate workshops and training, focusing on areas identified for improvement such as chronologies and prompt recording of visits to children.
44. Appropriate governance arrangements and scrutiny of service provision are in place. These include a number of aligned strategies, boards and meetings, such as the corporate parenting board and the shared Local Safeguarding Children Board with Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster, which is shortly to become the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership. Regular meetings between the director of children's services, the lead member and chief executive ensure that

they have a comprehensive understanding of the quality of services and performance.

45. The corporate parenting board, chaired by the lead member, now includes regular representation from children and young people. There is further work to do to ensure consistent attendance of partners and councillors, to enable a strong and continued focus on driving improvements for children and young people in Hammersmith and Fulham.
46. Senior leaders have invested effectively in the children's workforce, with a well-established recruitment programme of students and newly qualified social workers. Capacity in the contact and assessment service has increased, and a new layer of management has been added. However, leaders are aware that caseloads in the contact and assessment service and in the early help teams remain high, and they are monitoring these closely.
47. Staff enjoy working in Hammersmith and Fulham and morale is high. Workers speak positively about proactive, visible, supportive managers, access to clinical practitioners and good training opportunities, including the highly valued shared Centre for Systemic Social Work. This confirms findings from the annual staff survey.



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