

City of Westminster

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 9 September 2019 to 13 September 2019

Lead inspector: Nick Stacey
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	Outstanding
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Excellent services for vulnerable children in Westminster result in positive and enduring change for children and families. Provision for care leavers and provision for children in need of help and protection have developed further since the last inspection, and they are both outstanding. Collaborative, adaptable and distributive leadership continually develops and builds a research- and learning-based practice model. Leaders and senior managers work together highly effectively within a bi-borough approach to provide excellent strategic and some shared operational services with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and also to a lesser extent with the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

Highly skilled, experienced social workers and other frontline practitioners provide sensitive and innovative child-centred interventions. Parents receive imaginative and sensitive services, which help them to think differently about how they parent their children; many are enabled to provide safer and more confident daily care for their children.

Exemplary early help services, and highly skilled assistance for children at risk of entering care, address difficulties in families quickly and effectively, reducing the numbers of children requiring a statutory child protection or child in need plan. Re-referral rates are low, indicating that interventions result in sustained improvements in children's lives. Children who come into care are provided with highly dedicated care and support, mirroring the behaviours that are made in many birth families. Responsibility for children in care is a corporate priority and a responsibility across all parts of the council. Leaders are tireless and curious, and continuously evaluate new practice initiatives. They successfully attract innovation funding to pilot different practice models across the spectrum of services for children.

What needs to improve

- The formal matching and panel approval of adolescents in long-term foster homes.

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

1. The quality of work is exceptionally high, strongly focused on improving children's circumstances and highly empowering and enabling for parents and carers.
2. Excellent early help services, which are carefully targeted, innovative and continually evolving, help families with a wide range of needs, including very complex difficulties. The impact and outcomes of sensitive and empathetic work are strongly evident in informative assessments and a wide variety of evidence-based interventions, many of which have therapeutic elements. Services are provided by numerous partner agencies, demonstrating well-planned, cohesive and seamless partnership arrangements. A new family hub model is being piloted that integrates services even further through, for example, 'family navigators' and the introduction of more intensive programmes.
3. An intensive family support service provides a trauma-based and attachment-informed model of intervention which repairs many damaged family relationships. This prevents most of those children who are engaged with the service from entering care and is also integral to effectively helping 16- and 17-year-old children who are at risk of homelessness through breakdowns in their relationships at home.
4. Partner agencies have a shared understanding of thresholds, and contacts to the front door are meticulously managed. Social workers and managers make prompt, well-informed decisions about what help is required. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which operates across the three local authorities, is

highly effective. Workers promptly respond to referrals that come into the service which require further information to inform the next steps for children. Proportionate checks are undertaken with co-located professionals, who work closely together and collaborate very well. Consent is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden, to safeguard children. Once checks have been completed, social workers comprehensively analyse the information, alongside historical information held. Management oversight of this work is rigorous, providing clear decisions regarding the next steps to take to support and protect children.

5. The emergency duty service is hosted by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and is a sound service that responds in a timely way to contacts for all three of the boroughs. Management support and decision-making is consistently appropriate to the level of risk, and on-call managers make good use of both alerts from day services and emergency calls. Support from the police is available and utilised effectively when there are concerns for children's welfare.
6. Children who go missing are seen promptly and are asked who they would prefer to undertake their return home conversations. The response to children at risk of, or involved in, criminal exploitation is pioneering and impressive. A long-established integrated gangs and child exploitation unit is the fulcrum of much of this work. A broad range of relevant professionals and services, including assertive outreach workers, share and analyse intelligence every day to target children most at risk and those who are being drawn into gangs and associated areas of criminal and sexual exploitation. This landscape continually mutates and is highly fluid. Nevertheless, dedicated and persistent work engages many highly vulnerable children and reduces risks of further serious harm. Gangs and multi-agency criminal exploitation meetings, which cover the three local authorities, effectively coordinate and target interventions for children most at risk.
7. Responses to children at immediate risk of harm are timely and effective. Strategy meetings are used constructively to share relevant information about children to make well-informed decisions about the next steps. A high number of child protection investigations do not proceed to an initial child protection conference (ICPC). Managers had recently completed assurance work to test this threshold. Inspectors also examined some decisions not to hold an ICPC, and agreed with carefully documented reasons clearly explaining why a conference was unnecessary.
8. Assessments demonstrate a holistic and deep evaluation of children's and families' situations. Social workers use play and a wide spectrum of direct work approaches to explore how children experience their daily lives, including very young children, infants and babies. Assessments provide opportunities for therapeutic reflection and potential change for parents and carers, and interventions commence quickly. Consideration of family identity, diversity and

inequality are holistic and profoundly insightful, often demonstrating use of the 'social graces' tool. Recommendations and management oversight are reflective, curious and analytical, providing an evidentially sound and balanced platform for subsequent work.

9. Children's plans across the spectrum of services, from early help to children in need, and children in need of protection, are comprehensive and detailed. Interventions are sophisticated and often underpinned by highly skilled systemic direct work. Social workers receive frequent support from highly qualified clinicians based in their teams, including joint direct work with children and families.
10. When difficulties in families are more serious and complex, the public law outline (PLO) is used wisely to effect constructive and important changes for children's safety and well-being. Authoritative, clear and sensitive letters to parents explicitly outline what needs to happen to avoid care proceedings. Parenting assessments completed by social workers and other professionals are of a high quality. The number of care proceedings initiated is comparatively small, and they are completed quickly. The overall standard of social work evidence is well regarded by the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass).
11. Social work practice with disabled children and their families is consistently effective. Direct work, communication and observations regarding children with limited or no verbal communication are careful and thoughtful. Work with brothers and sisters in families ensures that their needs are not overlooked. Parenting assessments are supported by clinical practitioners, who help families resolve complex, entrenched difficulties. Plans are written sensitively so that children can understand them.
12. Social workers have manageable caseloads, regular supervision and easy access to clinical support. These strengths are further reinforced by their average length of post-qualifying experience and accredited training in a systemic model of practice. Consequently, children and families receive confident, imaginative interventions that often help them to constructively reframe their day-to-day relationship patterns and behaviours. They often feel empowered to attempt positive and more mindful parenting that places their children's needs and safety at the centre of family life.

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

13. Children in care receive exceptionally high-quality services. This is demonstrated through careful, thoughtful and sensitive work, combined with a determined resolve to help them overcome earlier trauma and adversity. Children enjoy rich, fulfilling childhood experiences with their foster carers. Children's achievements and progress, however modest, are proudly

acknowledged through well-attuned relationships and direct work. Social workers, and other frontline staff, demonstrate a significant emotional investment in helping children thrive.

14. The rapidly changing profile of children in care is adeptly predicted through pre-emptive planning, ensuring that their needs are successfully anticipated and addressed. A recent significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care, and a relatively high percentage of older children in care, present specific challenges. These are met well through harmonious, collaborative partnerships and intelligent, child-centred corporate parenting arrangements. Frontline staff are skilled and knowledgeable in working with these groups of children, including those associated with gangs and with a history of going missing, younger children, infants and babies. The needs of brothers and sisters are closely considered, alongside determined efforts to continually engage with children's families and wider networks.
15. Children come into care, either on a voluntary basis or through the onset of care proceedings, at the right points. Children of all ages are safeguarded, and care orders for older adolescents are sought when appropriate. Decisions by senior managers and legal advisers are meticulous and consider whether all alternative family options have been explored and whether children's wishes are fully considered. When it is safe, and in their best interests, children are carefully assessed and supported to return to live with their parents. When children require alternative long-term care outside their family, permanence planning is tailored carefully to each child, and the best plan and outcome are implemented quickly. Not all children in long-term foster care have had their permanent homes formally matched and approved at the Permanence panel, and senior managers recognise that this needs to be addressed. This shortcoming does not have any adverse impact on the long-term stability of children living in these arrangements
16. The connected persons' service is highly professional. It completes comprehensive assessments quickly, which facilitates children's timely moves to special guardians or other permanent living arrangements. Connected persons and special guardians benefit from well-crafted support plans. These address the current and future predicted needs of children. The adoption service, which is shared across the three local authorities, recruits a large number of adopters, and early planning with children's social work teams enables timely family-finding and matching. Post-adoption order support is creative, prompt and tailored to address the needs of all members of the family.
17. Effective corporate and individual planning for children in care is apparent through very low rates of placement breakdowns. Considering the significant percentage of older adolescents, the provision of high-quality, well-matched stable homes and supported semi-independent accommodation is a notable achievement. Intrinsic to maintaining stable homes for children in care is frequent visiting and exemplary direct work with children, building important,

continuous social work relationships. Interest and concern are expressed in the minutiae of children's daily lives, encompassing all their experiences, activities, friends, pets and holidays, which are explored and documented clearly. Social workers use a range of direct work tools, alongside knowledgeable use of an overarching systemic practice model.

18. Children's care plans are detailed and are routinely updated following their regular looked after reviews. Most consider children's wider needs very well and all identify a clear plan for permanence, featuring detailed contingency plans, by the second looked after review. Children are actively encouraged to participate in their looked after reviews and have ready access to independent advocates. Independent reviewing officers are skilled scrutineers. They ensure that children benefit from the right care plan, which they carefully explain to children in sensitive, personalised letters following their reviews.
19. This additional layer of practice expertise promotes reciprocal and trusting relationships with children in care within a safe, therapeutic practice culture, supported by joint work with accessible clinicians. This context safely enables significant trauma and earlier adverse experiences to be addressed with innovative and highly supported approaches, for both children and their parents. Confident, well-informed social work enables some bold and decisive decisions, such as careful work enabling a small number of children to safely return home on a care order.
20. The fostering service, shared across the three boroughs, efficiently recruits potential carers who can meet the complex needs of children. Foster carers reflect the cultural backgrounds of children, and there is good evidence of matching concerning ethnicity, language and background. Foster care support is a strength of the service. This features wrap-around support services, systemic practice, mentoring and social work support, all of which enhance the stability of children's experiences in their foster homes.
21. High-quality educational provision, and good outcomes achieved by many children in care, are supported by a strong and effective virtual school. Ten schools in Westminster are piloting trauma-informed approaches, reducing barriers to learning for children. Good-quality personal education plans include clearly formulated stretching and meaningful targets that are measured and tracked. Schools value the work of the virtual school. There have been no recent permanent exclusions and there is evidence of overall improved attainment. Many children in care obtain impressive GCSE grades, secure good college placements and a comparatively high number enter higher education.
22. Children's physical, emotional and mental health needs are closely monitored and addressed. Care leavers have ready access to their health histories. A dedicated child and adolescent mental health service practitioner supports social workers and carers working with children in care. Specialist, systemically trained clinicians also provide consultation to workers and undertake some joint

direct work. The wide prevalence and availability of this skilled support is an important factor in a very low rate of children's living arrangements breaking down.

23. Pathway plans for young people leaving care are regularly updated with them. The plans are aspirational, specific and valuable tools that help young people manage their priorities. Management oversight and monitoring of young people who are in custody have been strengthened through quarterly multi-agency reviews, ensuring the young people's highly specific needs are understood and supported.
24. Personal advisers and social workers work conscientiously with young people leaving care, building nurturing, significant relationships with them. Genuine warmth and affection for the children, and pride in their progress and achievements, are evident. Social workers are persistent during young people's setbacks and challenging periods. Young people readily access a range of specialist support, as many partners are co-located in the service. These include an employment and housing coach, a benefits adviser, the virtual school and mental health support.
25. Young people live in high-quality semi-independent and supported accommodation, where they receive careful support in developing independent living skills. These skills are closely evaluated before young people are nominated for final-stage independent housing. Comparatively high numbers of young people are engaged in purposeful education, employment and training (EET) activities. The needs of young people who are not engaged in EET are understood well, and focused work is undertaken to support and engage them through a bespoke panel.

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

26. Senior leaders and managers work collaboratively and intelligently, providing exemplary services to vulnerable children across the entire service spectrum, from early help to adoption and leaving care. Children are safeguarded decisively, when necessary, and skilled, intensive parenting support enables many children to live safer, happier and fulfilled childhoods.
27. Strategic and corporate arrangements are harmonious and closely aligned, providing a clear understanding and shared approach to prioritising and meeting children's needs. These favourable conditions are strengthened further by flexible operational service-planning. This enables services to quickly adapt and respond to new needs, research and best practice models.
28. A fluid, distributive and shared leadership and management ethos has weathered recent changes in senior personnel, demonstrating a sustainable

and adaptable approach. This flexibility is also a critical factor in maintaining effective shared services with Kensington and Chelsea, and Hammersmith and Fulham.

29. Resources across partnerships are harnessed through an integrated leadership team, which knits services together seamlessly. Politicians and leaders have shared objectives and plans, and keenly pilot and implement new best practice initiatives. A pilot early help hub is building further innovative interventions on a base of existing high-quality services. A tireless dedication to continual improvement and development is also apparent in: services for care leavers; the intensive support team; meeting the needs of a rapidly growing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; and in work undertaken to refine the auditing and quality assurance of social work practice standards.
30. An important impact of these bold and innovative approaches is that fewer children become the subject of more serious, statutory social work interventions. Only a small number of children become the subject of repeated child in need or protection plans. Westminster is a learning and research-based children's service, regularly attracting innovation funding. A current example is an external evaluation of the effectiveness of work with young people leaving care. A systemic practice model has been implemented across all layers of the service, and most frontline workers and managers have completed accredited courses. Systemic concepts and applications are routinely used and are widespread across children's services, including early help and the intensive support team.
31. Experienced and highly qualified social workers and other frontline staff value the considerable investment in their professional development and demonstrate their expertise in sophisticated and transformative direct work with children and their families. The quality and impact of practice is further informed and evaluated by Partners in Practice, the Centre for Systemic Social Work and a range of other external bodies, exemplifying a determined commitment to providing services to children that have a strong evidence base. Excellent practice guidance for social workers is a highly informed and illustrative tool that highlights clear quality benchmarks and compliance measures that social workers are required to demonstrate in their work.
32. Senior managers and leaders have an accurate, balanced and reflective self-assessment of their services. This is reinforced by a comprehensive understanding of the unique, complex demands presented by highly mobile and diverse central London communities. Outstanding work with children affected by gangs and criminal exploitation exemplifies this heightened awareness. Highly sophisticated intelligence and analysis is a primary strength of a pioneering integrated gangs and child exploitation unit. The unit's work prevents many children from exposure to more serious harm through assertive, intelligence-based outreach work and tailored interventions. This demanding

and frequently shifting safeguarding landscape benefits from constant curiosity and fresh insights invited from within and outside the council.

33. Westminster is a progressive, outward-looking children's service that welcomes peer reviews and external evaluations. As a member of Partners in Practice, the council also supports other local authorities to develop good practice. Leaders and managers rarely 'stand still', and eagerly learn from other local authorities' recognised good practice initiatives. The recent implementation of a new reflective practice auditing framework was informed by the work of another local authority. This has rapidly enhanced frontline managers' assessment of the effectiveness of direct work with children. A more inclusive approach features the participation of social workers, parents and children, where appropriate. This has produced richer, reflective practice learning.
34. Performance management is rigorous. Senior managers regularly probe and investigate variances and emerging concerns. Further regular scrutiny is evident through the close attention of the lead member, the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, which operates across the three local authorities, and the corporate parenting board. The interim bi-borough director of children's services has a comprehensive understanding of performance and appraises the chief executive regularly.
35. Westminster personalises its corporate parenting responsibilities through regarding children in care as 'our children', and all parts of the council have equal, shared responsibilities as members of the 'family firm'. Children and care leavers live in high-quality, well-matched and stable settings, and many achieve well at school, higher education, employment and training. The corporate parenting board efficiently and imaginatively exercises its duties, helping many children to live content and enriching lives.
36. Most social workers in Westminster have five or more years of post-qualifying experience. Annual turnover rates are relatively low, and this core of experienced, stable social workers is a critical element of a skilled, highly trained frontline workforce. Social workers are proud to work in Westminster. They have manageable caseloads and highly skilled, reflective supervision and clinical support. They know their children and families very well, and enthusiastically and eloquently described the exemplary work with children that they routinely undertake.



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