

London Borough of Ealing

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 4 November to 8 November 2019

Lead inspector: Caroline Walsh
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Services for children and families in Ealing have deteriorated since the last inspection in 2016, and now require improvement to be good. A combination of a new electronic recording system, a change to the way in which contacts and referrals were handled and insufficient checks and balances led to work building up at the integrated 'front door'. Consequently, there were delays in assessing children's needs, except for those children identified as being at immediate or potential risk of harm. Once referrals are accepted, the quality of practice improves, and some aspects of the service are working well.

The quality of services for children in care and care leavers is variable. Some children have waited too long to come into care, but when in care, most live in secure and stable homes. They receive good support for their education, and their health needs are met well. Care leavers receive a high level of support with their education, training and employment, but the quality of their accommodation is inconsistent, and some care leavers do not feel safe where they live.

Senior managers had already identified some of these concerns, although the impact of the weaknesses was not fully appreciated until the inspection. They are taking action to strengthen services and are determined to improve the experiences and progress of children.

What needs to improve

- Social work capacity and allocation of cases.
- The quality and timeliness of responses to referrals, including strategy discussions and child protection enquiries.
- The quality and consistency of management oversight and challenge by independent reviewing officers (IROs).
- Sufficiency of accommodation, including the range of accommodation options for care leavers.
- The quality and accuracy of performance reporting and quality assurance activities.
- The quality of responses to children and young people who are at risk of being homeless, and children on the edge of care.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good

1. Since the last inspection, in 2016, services for children who need help and protection have declined. Increased activity combined with insufficient management oversight have resulted in delays for children in need, and in some statutory work not being allocated to social workers.
2. Children and families who need early help benefit from an extensive range of targeted interventions provided by multi-disciplinary services. These are complemented by a strong universal offer available to all children and families who live in the borough of Ealing. Although some children experience delays of several weeks before being seen, they benefit from early help assessments that thoroughly identify their needs. The resulting plans are detailed and lead to focused provision that helps children.
3. When agencies and the public refer children to Ealing children's integrated response service (ECIRS) for a social work service, referrals are screened appropriately. Children at risk of significant harm are identified quickly and receive a timely response. However, a lack of ongoing management oversight results in some other children waiting too long at this point before sufficient information is gathered to inform next steps. This means that some children do not receive help at the earliest opportunity.
4. The response to concerns for children out of normal office hours is not appropriately focused on their needs. Insufficient staff capacity in the emergency

duty team means that visits to children are rarely prioritised, and, as a result, children's circumstances are not fully understood. Senior leaders made immediate changes during the inspection to address this weakness.

5. Children affected by domestic abuse are identified in a timely way, with good quality referrals from the police, detailing their contact with families. This contributes to effective plans that focus appropriately on reducing risks to children, leading to specialist support and targeted work with parents and carers to understand the impact on children.
6. When risks to children increase, managers do not consistently convene strategy meetings early enough to plan or review multi-agency interventions to protect children. Most strategy discussions do not fully involve all relevant partners in information-sharing and risk analysis, and child protection enquiries are poorly recorded. Delays in the completion of some child protection enquiries mean that those children and families had waited too long before multi-agency plans were in place to improve their circumstances. Timeliness is now improving as a result of closer tracking and strengthened management oversight.
7. Social workers in the multi-agency support teams have high caseloads, and this has impacted on the quality of their work with children. Some children in need are allocated to family support workers rather than social workers, under the supervision and support of deputy team managers. A recent increase in the numbers of children in need has made it more difficult for managers to closely monitor progress for these children. Group supervision and input from clinical psychologists ensures that the multi-disciplinary teams have a good understanding of the therapeutic needs of children, and this improves workers' understanding of family dynamics. Staff demonstrate strong, child-focused practice, but competing demands have limited their capacity to visit children in a timely manner, and this has delayed intervention and progress. Senior leaders have made a commitment to ensure that all statutory work is allocated to social workers by the end of 2019.
8. Most children and family assessments are thorough. They include detailed consideration of children's needs and family history, and focus on any risks to which children may be exposed. However, most take too long, leaving families with uncertainty. There are insufficient checkpoints for managers to assess progress and to re-assess timescales according to the needs of families.
9. Visits to children are not always prompt or in accordance with their levels of need. Limited use of risk assessment tools and inconsistent direct work with children hamper a good understanding of children's day-to-day experiences. Children's voices are not consistently expressed in their assessments and plans. In better cases, when work with children and families is prioritised, children's circumstances improve, as the quality of help provided by staff makes a positive difference. The assessment of children's needs is strengthened by the inclusion of clinical psychologists in teams.

10. Children's plans are of good quality. The majority are realistic and are clear about what needs to change. Most plans include specific and measurable activities that are tracked to assess progress. Plans are more dynamic in child protection cases, underpinned by regular core group meetings and reviews, and children are seen regularly. Good multi-agency attendance helps professionals and families to identify what changes have been made and the progress still required. Low levels of repeat child protection plans and repeat referrals for children indicate the effectiveness of the interventions.
11. Reviews for children in need are not frequent enough to support good manager oversight or to engage partners regularly in reviewing and updating plans. This has led to drift in progress for a small group of children.
12. Pre-proceedings work is underdeveloped, and some children experience delay, as concerns about their welfare have not been properly escalated. The limited and delayed use of pre-proceedings does not enable families to have clarity about the concerns that professionals have for their children.
13. Disabled children and their families benefit from a comprehensive offer of support. There are clear systems for ensuring proportionate interventions, with a range of direct help and the provision of short breaks. The delivery of integrated services from one site means that families can easily access support, and co-location enhances the communication and information-sharing between professionals.
14. Children vulnerable to criminal exploitation benefit from multi-agency coordinated planning that helps to reduce risk. A vulnerabilities screening tool is completed alongside children's assessments, and this is helping staff to identify those children at greater risk.
15. When children go missing, they are offered timely return home interviews. Although there is a low take-up by young people, social workers ensure that those interviews that do take place are well conducted and inform safety planning.
16. The response to young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless is too variable. Not all risks are sufficiently recognised or addressed. For a small number of young people, managers have been too slow to accept or promote their right to become children in care, and this has left them more vulnerable.
17. Robust systems mean that children who are home educated are clearly identified and that staff appropriately respond to any potential safeguarding concerns.
18. Allegations of abuse against staff working with children are taken seriously. Arrangements are improving as a result of a revised plan that ensures that concerns are properly addressed, and that information is shared.

19. The number of children known to be in private fostering arrangements is low, and the awareness of private fostering has not been sufficiently promoted, both within children's services and externally.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

20. Services for children in care and care leavers are more variable in quality than they were at the inspection in 2016. This is most apparent in the care leavers' service, where there is now a more limited range of suitable accommodation.
21. Staff demonstrate strong commitment to Ealing's 'Brighter Futures' model, with its ethos of keeping children within their families when it is safe to do so. Multi-disciplinary teams offer responsive and intensive support to prevent family breakdowns. For example, the intensive therapeutic short breaks service for disabled children has proved successful in supporting families and enabling children to remain at home. However, decisions for children to come into care are not always timely. A small number of children have come into care in an emergency, when earlier action would have reduced their exposure to harm or neglect.
22. Children are well supported to return home to their families when it is in their best interests, and multi-disciplinary teams are effective in providing the help to achieve this safely. When it is necessary to start care proceedings, social workers prepare good-quality assessments and court reports; any delays to proceedings have been outside of the control of the local authority.
23. For those children who cannot return to their birth parents, there is a strong focus on permanence within the wider family. Viability and special guardianship assessments are thorough and make clear recommendations. However, they are sometimes hurriedly completed, due to late notification.
24. For some children, the focus on finding suitable family members to care for them delays consideration of other options. There are missed opportunities to consider early permanence for children, either through pre-proceedings for unborn babies, or when children first come into care.
25. Social workers show persistence in their family-finding efforts to achieve adoption for all children who need it, including those with complex needs. Some children have waited a long time to be placed with a family, but for most children, this is due to the complexity of their needs and finding the right match.
26. The majority of children benefit from effective care plans that are holistic and demonstrate a therapeutic and nurturing approach to their care. Family contact time is carefully considered and supported if appropriate. Physical and emotional health needs are prioritised and met. Social workers know their children well and

talk insightfully about their experiences, but this is not always captured fully in children's records. Some children experience too many changes of social worker and infrequent visiting, making it hard for them to build meaningful, trusting relationships.

27. Children in care reviews are timely but of variable quality. IROs provide oversight of children's cases, together with appropriate consultation and follow-up of actions, but sometimes they do not provide sufficient challenge when children's needs are not being fully met. IROs write to children after their reviews, but not all letters are sufficiently child-focused or sensitively written. While some children are active participants in their reviews, there is a lack of consistent consideration of the use of advocacy to support children in having their voice heard. No children currently have an independent visitor, although this service can be commissioned on request.
28. Children in care are actively encouraged to develop interests and engage in a wide range of activities, and they are supported to do well in school. Targeted intervention has helped to improve the achievements of children at the end of Key Stage 2 and has led to higher levels of attendance. Key Stage 4 outcomes compare favourably with the national picture. Personal education plans are too variable, with an insufficient focus on transition and careers guidance, and support for some secondary-aged children.
29. The Horizons centre, which is greatly valued by children in care and care leavers, provides a physical presence for the virtual school. Here, children and young people access practical support and benefit from staff who are persistent in ensuring that their needs are met. Care leavers describe the service as 'brilliant'.
30. Children in care and care leavers at risk of exploitation experience variable responses. Some children benefit from effective interventions tailored to reduce risk. However, strategy discussions are not always held early enough, and the coordinated response is therefore not always timely, leaving children at potential risk.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people receive sensitive and prompt responses from the unaccompanied minors' team. Although a good use of interpreters means that children and young people can clearly communicate their needs, written assessments and plans do not always fully capture their individual situations or ensure that their diverse needs are understood and responded to.
32. Most children in care live in secure and stable homes. Senior leaders have strengthened the commissioning of local options to bring children back to Ealing so that they can be closer to family and friends. However, some children experience too many moves when they initially come into care, because matching is not always effective in ensuring that children are in the most suitable home.

33. Foster carers are positive about the quality and responsiveness of the support that they receive from their supervising social workers. They feel nurtured and they value the training opportunities provided. The team around the worker and the implementation of a therapeutic model help to provide security and avoid unplanned moves for children. The recruitment of local foster carers remains a challenge, despite concerted efforts to increase numbers.
34. A very small number of children are living with connected carers who have not complied with safeguarding checks. Although leaders know that this is unsatisfactory, efforts to resolve this have been unsuccessful. Managers took immediate action during the inspection to improve the management oversight of and expectations for these children's placements.
35. Ealing is the host for the Adopt London West regional adoption agency (RAA), which came into operation on 1 October 2019. The transition to the RAA was managed well. Adoption assessments completed before the transition are of a good quality, allowing children to be appropriately matched. Although few adoption orders have been completed in the last year, several children already live with their prospective adopters, and these arrangements are expected to be finalised shortly. Post-adoption and special guardianship support is a strength for the local authority, and there is effective use of the post-adoption support fund.
36. Some arrangements to support care leavers have deteriorated since the last inspection. Pathway plans are not seen by care leavers as useful documents as they are not always completed with them, nor do they necessarily reflect young people's individual circumstances. Plans are not always regularly updated or appropriately shared. This means that some young people have no ownership of their plans, and their concerns, such as those regarding their accommodation, are not fully addressed.
37. Housing choices for care leavers are too limited. The care leaver quota for council-run property has been significantly reduced as a result of budget cuts. Some care leavers live in highly unsatisfactory accommodation that increases their vulnerability and risk of exploitation. There are insufficient options for supporting care leavers to develop their skills when they are ready to move towards independent living.
38. Staff are aspirational for care leavers, many of whom are provided with a high level of support to engage in education or training and do very well. Leaders are proud of the number of care leavers currently attending university, and successes for both children in care and care leavers are celebrated.
39. The leaving care service is in touch with the vast majority of care leavers, although the quality and regularity of that contact is variable. Not all care leavers receive visits in accordance with their needs, and, for a few young

people, there is insufficient urgency in arranging contact to ensure that their needs are fully met.

40. The care leavers and children in care council voice is strong in Ealing, and they have successfully influenced service development. The published care leaver offer is comprehensive and was co-produced with young people, but some care leavers remain uncertain about the offer. For example, they are not clear about the implementation of the council tax exemption, or whether they have access to their health histories.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: requires improvement to be good

41. The quality of services for children has deteriorated from the good level demonstrated at the last inspection in 2016. The combination of turbulence caused by the new electronic recording system, the demands on senior managers as a result of commissioned improvement work with other local authorities, and increasing pressures within their own services have contributed to a reduction in management grip.
42. Concerns regarding the quality of performance information became apparent to senior managers earlier in the year, following the implementation of a new electronic recording system that failed to provide accurate management information. In addition, new practice standards introduced in the ECIRS in June 2019 led to increased volumes of referrals being sent through for assessment, and this then created bottlenecks. Children at immediate risk of harm continued to be prioritised and safeguarded appropriately. However, other children and families had to wait too long for help to be provided, and caseloads in some teams became very high. The delays caused by these pressures are still evident in the system, and senior managers have not been fully aware of the impact on the quality of practice. Funding has recently been agreed in order to add capacity at senior management level, to increase oversight and to deliver swifter improvements to services.
43. Performance management systems and quality assurance arrangements have not been robust enough to provide senior leaders with effective oversight of children's experiences. Manual systems have been developed as a temporary measure, but they are time-consuming and inefficient. Some areas of performance are not routinely monitored or evaluated to provide managers with the information they require to assure themselves of practice quality. There are insufficient systems to assure managers that children are regularly seen and that their plans are appropriately progressed. Quality assurance activities have reduced in the last six months. A high-trust model within children's services and the multi-agency safeguarding partnership, which does not have enough checks and balances, has not helped leaders to ensure that services for children and young people are timely and responsive to their needs.

44. Senior managers have taken appropriate action to increase the number of social workers in the ECIRS and the multi-agency safeguarding teams. The volume of work is now being better managed, and once assessments are underway, the quality of service improves. Investment in smaller units, with additional deputy team managers to provide support and oversight, has improved management capacity in teams. Multi-disciplinary teams have been created that include clinical psychologists, who support staff to better understand family dynamics. Staff know their children well and remain committed and motivated to improving their progress and experiences.
45. There is a strong history of piloting and developing innovative services in Ealing, and leaders continue to offer an extensive early intervention and prevention service that is successfully delivering support to large numbers of children and families. The Brighter Futures model supports foster carers and families to provide high-quality, nurturing care and maintain the positive stability seen for many children. Consequently, the number of children in care is relatively low.
46. Corporate parents in the local authority are proud of the achievements in educational outcomes for children in care and care leavers, and in the number of care leavers who are engaged in purposeful activities or stay in higher education. Young people attend the corporate parenting panel, which is chaired by the leader of the council, and they are able to provide direct feedback to members and leaders about the quality of services that they receive. However, insufficient priority has been given to ensure that all care leavers have access to safe and suitable accommodation.
47. Cafcass and the judiciary are both complimentary about the quality of practice for children in care proceedings. Although some care proceedings are taking longer than average, partners confirmed that the delays are due to the complexity of cases, some of which include international elements; these are managed well, and the findings are used to improve learning.
48. Mature safeguarding partnership arrangements in Ealing help to build collaborative work, and this is enhanced by the engagement and involvement of young people. Young Ealing Safeguarding (YES), a group for young people aged 13–19, provides a clear and strong voice for young people on safeguarding issues. Members come from diverse backgrounds and are able to represent the voices of different children's experiences.
49. Effectively coordinated multi-agency responses are helping to protect children who are at risk of radicalisation. Leaders recognise the challenges and complexities of safeguarding children and young people in the borough and they are investing in measures to address the vulnerabilities within their local community, including using a public health approach to knife crime.
50. Senior leaders appropriately use feedback from complaints and surveys to improve services. The low level of advocacy for children in care has not been

sufficiently interrogated to ensure that all children's views and experiences are known and understood. IROs, an independently commissioned service, deliver adequate oversight for children in care, but the quality of their interventions is not well evaluated.

51. While some elements of supervision are reflective and child-centred, for other workers, supervision is less regular and does not always offer sufficient case management. Recent changes to the supervision model are beginning to provide more case direction. Senior managers have implemented a clear plan to enhance the support provided by frontline managers.
52. Senior managers appropriately prioritise the recruitment of social workers. A comprehensive training offer is provided, which is highly valued by the workforce. Training and development opportunities are well tailored to staff with different levels of experience. Many staff report having high morale, and they feel well supported. Newly qualified social workers are positive about the support given to them, and this helps them to develop the skills required to progress through their assessed and supported year in employment. Despite this, turnover is relatively high for social workers and this has had an impact on some children.
53. Senior managers have fully accepted the findings of the inspection and are taking immediate and appropriate action to improve the experiences and progress of children.



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