

Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 21 October to 25 October 2019

Lead inspector: Marcie Taylor
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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Services for children and families in Kingston have continued to improve strongly since being judged good overall at the previous inspection in 2015. Senior managers and elected members demonstrate a relentless determination to provide the best possible services, based on a comprehensive understanding of practice and performance and of the needs of children and families in Kingston. Learning from reviews, audits and focused visits is skilfully implemented. Staff are highly skilled and well motivated and take great pride in their work. They are supported by managers who are equally passionate about improving children's experiences.

Children in need of help and protection receive timely and well-targeted support. Multi-agency working is well established and contributes effectively to risk reduction. Services for children in care and care leavers are particularly impressive. They are supported by corporate parents, who play an active part in ensuring that children and young people are given every opportunity to flourish. Children's views routinely inform assessments, plans and service development.

What needs to improve

- The review of child in need plans, including plans for disabled children.
- The range and targeting of post-16 pathways into employment, including apprenticeships and local business opportunities.

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

1. A wide range of increasingly well-coordinated and effective early help is available for children and families in Kingston. Assessments are thorough; they clearly identify risk, and children's needs are quickly addressed. A clear escalation process means that workers identify children during assessment who require more urgent intervention so that they do not wait unduly for the right service. When concerns increase, children are appropriately stepped up from early help to statutory services. The use of family coaching provides effective direct work with families to reduce risks for children. A well-established system enables staff to successfully manage the demand for services within Strengthening Families Plus, which is part of the early help offer, and managers monitor and appropriately prioritise children's cases for allocation to the team.
2. Thresholds of need are clearly understood by staff and partner agencies and are applied consistently. Professionals know how to access support through the single point of access (SPA), and multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) checks are undertaken appropriately to enhance the quality of decision-making for children. When an assessment of need is required, this is allocated swiftly. Comprehensive information from partners is gathered as part of the assessment. The co-location of professionals increases purposeful dialogue between partners and leads to timely multi-agency decisions; this adds value in understanding children's current circumstances.
3. Management oversight of decisions is evident, and the rationale is clearly recorded on case records. Decisions to progress to assessment are timely and are appropriate to the level of risk and need. Protective action is taken when children are at immediate or potential risk of harm, including effective responses to children outside of office hours.
4. Prompt initial strategy discussions between social care and the police inform immediate safety planning. These are followed by routine face-to-face strategy meetings with a broad range of partners, which provide valuable additional information. These meetings are well recorded, demonstrate clear analysis of information, and lead to proportionate and appropriate plans to protect children.

5. Children are allocated swiftly and are seen promptly by social workers, supported by clear management direction on actions to be taken. Assessments of individual children's and family's needs are of a consistently good quality. Chronologies are used to inform assessments as a matter of routine. Assessments are regularly updated, and they benefit from frequent management oversight throughout the whole process. Identity and culture are thoroughly explored and are taken into account effectively within assessments and subsequent plans. Interim safety plans are devised swiftly with children and parents so that risks are managed and that children know where to go for help should this be needed. Plans are appropriate in all cases, based on good analysis of information gathered during the assessment. Action to protect children is taken promptly when interim safety plans are not working, or when risks increase.
6. Family therapists, co-located with social workers, provide accessible and effective consultation and programmes of support to children and social workers. Creative direct work with children helps social workers to develop a good understanding of children's lives and experiences. Genograms are used routinely, increasing the understanding of the child's family support network. Partner agency involvement in assessments, plans and reviews is a strength.
7. Children build trusting and meaningful relationships with social workers, helped by an increasingly stable workforce. For example, some social workers have been part of the disabled children's team for several years, and there is evidence that relationship-based social work is making a positive difference to children's lives. Direct work is also carried out with parents to help them to understand the concerns. Children and parents are encouraged to attend case conferences and are supported well to contribute their views to decisions that affect them.
8. Child protection plans and most child in need plans are regularly updated and include clear actions with timescales for completion. Core groups are well attended by partner agencies. Risk is well understood, and cases are stepped up appropriately within the safeguarding teams. Social workers visit children regularly and help parents to understand what needs to change and by when. Contingency plans are clear on most cases. Most assessments for disabled children are updated six-monthly so that their changing needs are identified, and appropriate support is put in place to meet these. However, not all plans include clear actions, and some are overly focused on tasks rather than addressing the child's needs in a more holistic way.
9. Child in need plans are regularly reviewed. The plans include appropriate contributions from key professionals and they are informed by parents' and children's views. Child in need reviews are not consistently conducted or recorded using the social work practice model. This limits the opportunities for parents and children to be clear about what professionals are worried about, should concerns escalate and cases need to be stepped up to child protection.

10. Pre-proceedings activity, under the public law outline, is initiated appropriately when child protection plans are not effective in helping to reduce risks to children. Letters before proceedings are clear, explaining to parents what needs to happen and by when. This has enabled children to remain with their birth family following successful risk reduction during the pre-proceedings process. Timely progression to proceedings, when necessary, ensures that children do not remain in unsafe circumstances.
11. Reflective supervision and management oversight of work are consistently evident on case files and are a strength of the service. Good analysis of children's circumstances and effective use of the social work model contribute to a scaling of risk to understand and measure progress. Managers routinely review actions at a 10-day review point to ensure progression of work.
12. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive a rapid and sensitive response. The options are clearly explained to them in order to help them to make informed choices. Considerable effort is made to explore support needs to enable children to successfully remain at or return home. Effective plans are put in place, including the use of outreach services from local semi-independent living accommodation. Children who are assessed as at risk of being made homeless by parents are eligible for the council's 'At Home' scheme, which enables children to be considered as a priority on the local authority's housing register if they remain living at home in the short term. This reduces the risk, as well as the numbers of children who present as homeless in an emergency.
13. Risks in relation to children who go missing are identified well. The response is timely and proportionate. The 'missing' panel has good oversight of these children and identifies patterns and reasons for episodes of going missing. Strategy meetings are routinely held, and plans demonstrate that sustained efforts are made to locate the children. When they are found, timely return home interviews are undertaken by a small team of skilled workers, who are tenacious in their efforts to engage the children and to understand the reasons why they have gone missing.
14. The 'cause for concern' panel regularly meets to review and plan interventions for individual vulnerable children who are missing education, and staff undertake appropriate steps and checks to ascertain the whereabouts of these children. Following exclusion, pupils are offered a broad curriculum via a pupil referral unit, and this is closely matched to both their needs and interests. The youth resilience service proactively shares information with gangs workers, and together they support children effectively to re-engage with education and reduce risk.
15. Risks of exploitation or vulnerability to exploitation are identified well by social workers, and plans are clear regarding concerns and protective factors. Safety

plans, often designed with children, identify what needs to happen to keep them safe. Risk assessments are now routinely undertaken and reviewed when concerns escalate, and the resulting risk minimisation plans are increasingly effective in keeping children safe. The multi-agency risk, vulnerability and exploitation (MARVE) panel benefits from strong partnership collaboration and enables effective information-sharing. Senior managers are taking appropriate action to further strengthen oversight of completed actions arising from the MARVE panel.

16. Numbers of private fostering arrangements remain very low. However, there is a clear and implemented action plan to raise the awareness of schools and local communities of the need to refer children not living with immediate relatives. Workers in the SPA ask specific questions to establish the possibility of a private fostering arrangement, to ensure timely assessment and support.
17. A well-established, assured and confident approach to allegations against professionals is thorough and proportionate to the initial information presented. The rationale for decisions made is well recorded, and a written response to the referrer gives a clear overview of advice. A good range of training and awareness-raising activity targets appropriate services in the local area. This includes theatre groups, faith groups and independent schools. A leaflet for private tutors has recently been developed, and one is planned for nannies. Both of these reflect the local demography.

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

18. Children in care and care leavers receive an outstanding service. Children only come into care when necessary and appropriate. When it is not possible for children to remain living with their parents or to return home from care, permanence options are considered at a very early stage, and this is a fixed agenda item in children looked after reviews. Regular permanence planning meetings take place for all children awaiting permanence, and the meetings continue until this has been achieved, avoiding any unnecessary delay.
19. Children are supported to live with their extended family if they are unable to remain with their parents. An increasing number of children benefit from care from people they already know and trust, through special guardianship orders. This reduces the stress and anxiety of a move to live with strangers and helps to maintain their sense of identity. Special guardianship assessments are thorough; they fully consider the capacity of carers to meet the child's specific needs throughout their childhood, until maturity.
20. When the permanence plan is for adoption, family finders are allocated at an early stage. Before placement orders are granted, anonymous profiles shared with prospective adopters enable consideration of potential matches in order to prevent delay for children. For children with more complex needs, extensive

searches are undertaken to find the right adopters for them, including adoption activity days and national searches. Contingency planning takes place in parallel with ongoing adoption searches in order to widen the search for the right carers for specific children.

21. Children in care continue to receive good support with their education. Strong and effective leadership of the virtual school ensures close oversight of their progress and results in timely, well-targeted interventions when necessary. Staff in the virtual school team know their children well and understand the barriers that they face in their lives and in achieving their goals. Staff in schools have a good understanding of children's circumstances and needs and put in place effective interventions that support children's progress well. The pupil premium is used creatively to support both the educational and personal development of children.
22. Children benefit from good-quality foster care placements, and the outcomes for children are very positive. They develop secure attachments with their foster families and have a very strong sense of belonging. Children receive personalised care that meets their needs. Good consideration is given to issues of equality and diversity, ensuring that children's identity needs are met well. Direct work with children to understand their early life story helps them to settle and thrive in their placements.
23. Care plans are reviewed regularly to ensure steady progress, or more often, to reflect changing circumstances. Review minutes are written directly to children, and help them to understand their progress, and, where relevant, the permanence options being considered for them. This helps to reduce anxiety and uncertainty for children. Independent visitors are available for children in care. Although no children are currently taking up this offer, senior managers are actively seeking to redress this. However, many children in care benefit from independent advocates, who sensitively support them to participate in key decision-making about their lives.
24. The 'This is Us' group of children in care is a strength. It is proactive and well run, and engages children effectively to ensure that their voices are heard. Children are well supported to attend the corporate parenting panel. They set the agenda and chair the quarterly meetings of the children in care council, to ensure that managers are held to account. Children have influenced several key changes to services, such as the development of local semi-independent accommodation and changes to the times of health assessments to better suit children's availability. This group planned and organised a recent well-attended and successful achievement event.
25. Care leavers receive a highly effective service. Workers in the leaving care service describe a strong and supportive team environment in which they are encouraged to share their wealth of knowledge and experience to support all young people who access the service. Workers know the young people well and

take pride in their achievements. Visits to young people are regular and purposeful and demonstrate good engagement and focus on need and risk, and this results in supportive action. The team is ambitious, and staff are determined to achieve the best for care leavers, listening carefully to the young people themselves. For example, a new pathway planning tool that was instigated by care leavers has been developed and implemented.

26. A good range of effective and accessible learning and support workshops help care leavers to develop skills and confidence in living independently. These include a 'my bank' workshop, tenancy preparation, and healthy relationships. Young people are helped financially when complex and lengthy benefit applications are in progress. A specialist adviser from the Department for Work and Pensions provides welfare rights advice to workers in order to build their knowledge in this area. This helps staff to support those young people making applications and appeals regarding universal credit; it increases the likelihood of a successful outcome and reduces young people's anxiety.
27. Pathway plans are regularly updated and include a clear focus on needs. Plans are routinely reviewed within six months, and they are additionally reviewed when young people's circumstances change. The new pathway plan format focuses more on capturing and taking account of young people's views. Health needs are identified well, and both direct and consultative support for emotional health is offered and undertaken by the therapist.
28. Work with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is of high quality and is sensitively managed. Knowledgeable and tenacious workers ensure that needs are assessed swiftly, and comprehensive planning enables young people to be fully aware of their legal options and what to expect in the future. Young people are helped with their applications for the right to remain, and they are supported to maintain contact with their birth families in their country of origin. Proactive support for accommodation, education, employment, emotional health and legal advice is well evidenced. Visits are regular, and effective liaison with key workers in supported accommodation means that young people feel understood and supported by the people who know them or who are getting to know them. Issues relating to culture and identity are well understood, and, when possible, young people are placed where they can meet with others from similar circumstances and cultures, should they wish to do so.
29. A wide range of suitable accommodation is available for care leavers, commensurate with their needs. Young people are encouraged to demonstrate their readiness for independence and are supported well, practically and financially, towards successfully managing their own tenancies.
30. For care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), a specific focus on encouraging applications is evident in pathway plans. Care leavers engaged in further education are actively supported by key workers and outreach workers from supported accommodation providers, who have strong

links with local colleges. Effective joint work helps more young people to remain in a learning environment. Links with local businesses to create and target post-16 pathways into employment, including apprenticeships, are underdeveloped, limiting the opportunities for care leavers and vulnerable young people to access jobs near to where they live.

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

31. Leaders prioritise the needs of Kingston's children through a relentless focus on understanding the quality of practice and acting decisively to improve services. They embrace external scrutiny of their work and put in place effective plans to address areas highlighted for development. Very strong political commitment and the appointment of the chief executive of the council, who has a sustained track record of improving children's services, have brought a renewed focus and a clear understanding of local needs. Services for children and families in Kingston are provided by Achieving for Children (AfC), a not-for-profit community interest company. A recent and more rigorous and systematic approach to strategic planning has led to clearer governance arrangements between the local authority and AfC, resulting in improved accountability and scrutiny between the local authority as commissioner and AfC as provider of services.
32. Senior managers, in consultation with children, have developed the children in care council, 'This is Us', to strengthen the voice of Kingston children in service reviews and development. A dedicated participation officer for children in care, alongside independent reviewing officers, facilitates and engages a wide-ranging group of children in care. This supports them to participate meaningfully and to contribute to decisions and policies that affect them.
33. Corporate parenting is particularly strong, underpinned by a determination to act as a 'good parent'. This determination is at the heart of the corporate parenting strategy and resulting plans. The corporate parenting panel has an ambitious forward work programme that covers the full range of issues affecting children in care and care leavers. Meetings are regularly attended by a range of corporate representatives, with appropriate debate and strong, active challenge and engagement from children. One of the outcomes arising from a request from children has been the setting up of a peer mentoring scheme to develop skills and confidence and support emotional well-being.
34. Relationships with partner agencies are strong. Strategic partners and corporate colleagues engage well in improving services for children. The new local safeguarding arrangements are in place and are based on well-established and united engagement from strategic partners. Effective relationships have been established with the judiciary, who describe the local authority as a 'compact, well-organised, efficient, proactive and interactive authority'. They say that, 'Cases come to court at the right time and they are presented very

well, with appropriate consideration of the best options for children.’ This feedback concurs with the views of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), which reports that Kingston children in court proceedings receive a very good service.

35. Senior leaders have worked effectively with the local adoption consortium to help manage a smooth transition to the Adopt London South regional adoption agency (RAA). Agreed expectations about the quality of practice have helped to provide consistency in terms of the recruitment and assessment of adopters. The recruitment strategy focuses on Kingston children awaiting adoption, and this has been taken forward collaboratively by the RAA. Consistency of social work support provided to adopters during the transition to the RAA has ensured well-informed decision-making in matching children with adopters. Effective management oversight has helped to ensure that child-centred decision-making continues, for example, when matching is being considered for second-time adopters.
36. The local authority, through AfC, has a strong performance management culture, with an equally strong focus on practice learning. The senior leadership team maintains an excellent understanding of its services, as evidenced in its comprehensive self-assessment, that accurately reflects strengths and areas for further improvement. Senior managers are resilient when new challenges present themselves. They are not complacent and have a driving ambition to continually improve the quality of practice across children’s services, making good use of learning from internal and external audits and reviews.
37. A mature and well-established audit programme is used effectively to focus on specific aspects of work to understand impact. As a result, for example, improvements have been made to contingency plans on child protection cases, and to record-keeping, to note when social workers share assessments and plans with professionals and families for their views. Increasingly, activity to understand the impact and effectiveness of practice is providing a clearer focus on children’s experiences of the help and support that they receive.
38. A wide range of performance management information is analysed effectively to prioritise areas for improvement. One of the current priorities is to work in greater partnership with parents of children with complex needs, and their engagement is monitored by the SEND partnership board. Senior managers have also identified a deficit of local foster placements and residential provision, which results in some children being placed at a considerable distance from home. Appropriate action is being taken, including enhancing commissioning capacity, to secure enough local high-quality placements that meet the needs of all children in care and care leavers.
39. Senior managers use a variety of methods to gain the views of children and families to inform service review and development. Their well-informed knowledge and confidence about the quality of practice are derived from a

range of established activities to enable them to target and focus on specific areas for practice improvement. Their approach places feedback from children and families at the centre, and includes learning from complaints, lessons from serious case reviews, audit and practice observations.

40. Investment in the children's workforce has been instrumental in reducing caseloads, enabling consistently good and outstanding social work practice. A clearly set out and accessible learning and development pathway offers an extensive range of training and learning opportunities for staff. Training is regularly evaluated and revised to focus on priority areas for improvement. Recruiting permanent staff is challenging in Kingston and is a high priority. National and local data is used well to better understand and tackle the challenges.
41. Staff are unanimously positive about working in Kingston. They describe a highly supportive working environment in which managers are challenging and supportive in equal measure. Regular, high-quality reflective supervision helps workers to have the confidence, skills and capacity to deliver consistently good direct help and support to children. They take great pride in what they do, and this is reflected in meticulous and sensitive records of their work.



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