

London Borough of Hackney

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 11 November 2019 to 22 November 2019

Lead inspector: Brenda McInerney
Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the previous inspection in 2016, there has been a decline in the quality of practice and services for some vulnerable children and their families in Hackney. A focused visit undertaken in February 2019 identified areas for priority action because some children were living in situations of significant harm for too long before action was taken. Since that time, senior leaders have taken steps to improve services for children in need of help and protection. There has been a positive shift in the practice and management culture so that it is increasingly child-focused.

Early help services are well developed and effective. The majority of children in need make good progress. However, practice for children at risk of harm is not yet consistently good, and a small number of children live in neglectful circumstances for too long. For these children, the pace of change towards child-focused and authoritative practice has been too slow. The quality and impact of practice has deteriorated for some specific vulnerable groups of children, including disabled children, privately fostered children and children missing education. This means that services for these groups of children are not consistently good.

While many of the recommendations from the 2016 inspection have been addressed, some areas of practice remain as areas for improvement. Leaders have increased management capacity and the frequency of oversight of casework, yet the quality of that oversight and decision-making by managers is not yet consistently effective. Weaker practice is not always recognised by managers, creating delays in making changes for children. Senior leaders and members do not have a wholly accurate view of practice and were not aware of all of the areas for improvement identified within this inspection.

The quality and impact of services for children in care and young people leaving care has remained good. Children make significant progress from their starting points. Leaders and members continue to invest in a range of high-quality services which are making a real difference to children in care and care leavers.

What needs to improve

- The quality of information-sharing by partners and the quality of decision-making within strategy discussions.
- The assessment of the impact for children of living in neglectful environments to inform authoritative and child-centred practice.
- The quality of assessment and planning for children subject to private fostering arrangements.
- The timeliness and effectiveness of pre-proceedings work, including the quality of contingency planning.
- The welfare of children who are missing education or who are home educated is safeguarded
- The effectiveness of management oversight by leaders and managers at all levels, including the effectiveness of oversight from child protection conference chairs.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Requires improvement

1. The quality of practice with children in need of help and protection is improving from the low base identified during the focused visit earlier this year, but it remains too variable. In most cases, good work is helping to improve children's circumstances, and during the inspection no children were found to be at immediate risk of harm. Initial planning for children is robust, and there is effective oversight of the progress made by children in need. A small number of children experiencing neglect and who are subject to children protection plans

do experience delays in being protected. More recent child protection planning demonstrates better practice and plans which set clear goals to reduce harm for children. Work with some families within pre-proceedings is weak. Services for disabled children, privately fostered children and children missing education are not yet consistently good.

2. Thresholds are applied consistently and effectively at the front door when concerns first arise, and children and families receive the right level of initial help when they need it. The emergency duty team provides effective decision-making out of hours, including innovative responses to prevent children from being held in police custody in the borough.
3. Children and families are helped and supported by a range of effective early help services. When children's needs escalate, assessments are completed by social workers within the same family support units, thus providing continuity for families receiving longer term support. Older children benefit from trusted relationships with Young Hackney workers, who provide targeted support that is effective in helping vulnerable children to address difficulties at home, school and in the community.
4. Children at risk of immediate harm are seen promptly by social workers, and immediate action is taken to protect them. Most strategy discussions are timely, but for a very small number of children there is a delay in recognising children at risk of significant harm until there has been a further incident or concern. Strategy discussions do not involve all relevant partners sharing agency information until the initial child protection conference stage. This means that subsequent enquiries and assessments for many children don't include key information, for example that held by the police about adults. Better practice in information-sharing is evident in strategy discussions concerning harm to children on open cases.
5. The timeliness of social work visits to children and the completion of written assessments has significantly improved from the low base at the time of the focused visit. Assessments are mostly thorough and lead to proportionate decisions about next steps. Children's unique cultural identity is recognised and reflected in assessments. Families benefit from help during the assessment process, particularly when it addresses risks arising from domestic abuse. Social workers make concerted efforts to engage fathers in the assessment process, and the potential risks from males are increasingly recognised in assessments and plans for children. Some assessments remain too adult-focused and do not address the lived experience of very young children, particularly those living at risk of neglect. This results in plans which are too focused on the experience of adults rather than fully considering the impact of the interventions for the child.
6. Services for children in need have improved since the findings of the focused visit. There is additional senior manager oversight to ensure that children's circumstances are improving, or that decisive action is taken to intervene to

enable this to happen. When needs are addressed, children are appropriately stepped down to effective early help services, and a low proportion of children are re-referred to social care.

7. A range of key services are co-located alongside the small social work teams known as units, where children and families are allocated across a manager and social workers. This integrated way of working enables children and families to benefit from prompt and effective clinical consultation and support that is making improvements to their lives. A forensic clinical psychologist is supporting complex work to more accurately assess males who may pose a risk to children. The domestic abuse intervention service also provides effective support to victims, as well as a range of evidence-based programmes for perpetrators of domestic abuse. The risks to children from domestic abuse are well understood, and the impact for children is effectively addressed within plans.
8. A range of relevant partners make a positive contribution to the regular reviews of children's plans. Not enough children, however, are encouraged to participate in reviewing their plan in any way, or have their views sufficiently considered within review meetings and conferences. As a result, what children think or believe is getting better or worse in their daily family life does not routinely inform key decision-making or planning.
9. While many child protection plans are child-focused, not all are. Some plans measure parental compliance, rather than the changes needed for children and the timescale within which this should be achieved. Reviews of children's plans are not informed by updated written assessments of need. This includes children who are subject to plans for a number of years. Social work reports to child protection conferences do not consistently provide an updated evaluation of risks for children, or the impact of the work to date. Child protection conference chairs do not provide consistent challenge when plans do not improve or address children's circumstances. This is compounded at times by over-optimism and lack of challenge within the social work unit meetings that oversee cases. For this reason, a small number of children have been left in neglectful circumstances for too long before decisive action is taken. In better casework, where intervention is not making improvement for children, social workers and managers have taken timely and effective action to review and escalate children's cases.
10. Most decisions to initiate pre-proceedings are appropriate, with effective practice in pre-birth planning. For a small number of children, the decisions to escalate to pre-proceedings is not timely and follows lengthy periods of child protection planning, which has not improved children's circumstances. There is a lack of clear contingency planning in pre-proceedings work, which delays the exploration of alternative family carers for children. As most cases progress onto care proceedings, this cumulative delay means that a very small number of children do not come into care when they need to, even when the threshold has been met. A review of children's cases following the focused visit resulted in a

large increase in care applications to court in recent months. Routine management oversight is not consistently ensuring the progression of plans for a small number of children in pre-proceedings. Senior managers identified immediate actions to improve this key area of practice during the inspection.

11. Multi-agency interventions with vulnerable adolescents are helping to address the risks associated with exploitation, serious youth violence and going missing. Concerted efforts are made to engage children in work to develop their insight in order to decrease the risk in their daily lives. When young people return from being missing, they are not all routinely offered a timely interview. However, they do benefit from effective interventions and conversations about the risks of going missing.
12. Work to develop a 'contextual safeguarding' approach is having an early impact at a community level and is providing a single multi-agency planning forum to consider the risk for networks of young people. Children's risks are well identified through analysis of information-gathering and liaison between professionals, including the Hackney integrated gangs unit and neighbouring boroughs. Following a period of detailed planning, leaders recognise that there is more work to do to fully integrate and align the approach in day-to-day social work practice. In a small number of cases where this approach is being used, social workers are making effective use of peer mapping to help children make more positive choices about friendship groups and the safer use of social media.
13. The quality of services for disabled children has deteriorated since the previous inspection. Most children with disabilities and their families receive timely support. However, a number of children experience delay in the completion of assessments, and, for some families, there is delay in implementing support plans. Children with complex needs are provided with a range of support by a flexible service. However, there is a significant backlog of care packages to review, although this is being tackled and is reducing. Some children with complex needs experience delay in accessing suitable education provision, leaving them spending significant amounts of time at home and placing their families under stress. Following this deterioration in services, senior leaders took remedial action earlier in the year and implemented a plan for improvement. This is beginning to have some positive impact in improved safeguarding practice and more robust management oversight of the progress of children's cases.
14. Senior leaders have been slow to strengthen their response to a significant increase in the number of children who are missing from education. Many within specific community groups are still to be assessed as home educated. Checks on children, including vulnerable children who are de-registered from mainstream school, are timelier and more robust. The local authority is beginning to build a more positive relationship with the home education community. However, there is a backlog of cases, and the local authority has been too slow to establish whether these children are being safeguarded.

15. Children in families with no recourse to public funds receive an effective holistic social work service alongside the provision of accommodation. Managers take a collaborative approach to working with community groups, and this is helping to provide families with timely support to achieve settled status.
16. Provision of support and accommodation to homeless young people has improved since the previous inspection. Young people now benefit from a child-focused assessment of their needs and a clear option for becoming looked after. A small number of young people are helped to return to their family home and remain successfully at home with intensive support from the rapid support service.
17. Private fostering arrangements are under-developed. Some children are living in private fostering arrangements where the adult's capacity to meet children's needs is insufficiently assessed. Senior leaders took immediate action to address weaknesses in the assessment and approval of some private foster carers that were found during the inspection.

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

18. Children in care and leaving care in Hackney benefit from a strong service. Not all children who need to come into care do so at the right time, meaning that some children enter care with an increased range of needs. However, once in care, most children live in placements that meet their needs and children make good progress. There is a good range of health, therapeutic and educational support to meet their identified needs.
19. Children benefit from stable, nurturing relationships with carers, social workers, clinicians and virtual school staff. Social work visits to children are regular, purposeful and well recorded. This includes children living at some distance from Hackney. Most children have meaningful long-term, trusting relationships with their social workers. Children in care are helped to stay in touch with family and friends. Arrangements are regularly reviewed to ensure that contact is a positive experience for children.
20. CAF/CASS managers spoke positively about the quality of social work evidence in care proceedings, despite a very large increase in the number of care applications being made to the court in the summer. The duration of care proceedings is in line with the national average, and in most cases the local authority's proposed care plan for children secures the confidence of the court. The timeliness of court and permanence planning processes is now robustly tracked.

21. All children have a clear permanence plan, and most children achieve timely permanence once they are in care. Most children in long-term foster care are formally matched with their carers. Children who need adoption are identified in a timely way through early permanence planning, including fostering for adoption. Older children and children with more complex needs benefit from being adopted. There have been no adoption breakdowns in six years. The ongoing recruitment of adopters is now within a regional adoption agency, Adopt London North. Leaders recognise that more children could benefit from special guardianship arrangements with extended family members, and appropriate plans are in place to address this through a dedicated support service for connected carers and guardians.
22. An increase in the number of young people over 16 requiring care placements presents a significant challenge in Hackney, where there is an acute shortage of affordable accommodation. Robust commissioning and child-focused work by the placement management unit are helping to ensure that the majority of young people live in accommodation, including semi-independent accommodation, that is suitable and provides on-site support to meet their needs.
23. Children are well supported to participate in their reviews, which are planned by children and reviewing officers as fun and creative sessions. Reports to reviews and records of them are written in a way that would make sense to the child reading them. However, children in local foster placements and their social workers do not routinely contribute to foster carers' annual reviews, and their views do not always inform the future development and support for carers.
24. Assessments of children's needs are not being updated even when there is a change in care plan, such as a move from foster to residential care. Reviewing officers do not always provide challenge on behalf of children, when, in a very small number of cases, care plans do not progress in line with their expressed wishes, and children experience delay in important decisions being made.
25. There is effective planning for children to return home from care when this is in their best interests. Ongoing therapeutic support is making a real difference in bolstering the resilience of children and families. The unique family learning intervention programme, which entails intensive residential assessment of family relationships alongside the key professionals, is helping to prevent some care arrangements from breaking down.
26. The health needs of children in care and care leavers are well addressed, and timeliness of review health assessments is improving from a low base. Specialist roles within the virtual school mean that children do not wait unduly to access speech and language, occupational therapy and educational psychology assessments. Children get timely help for emotional and mental health needs from the co-located clinical service, through a variety of therapeutic interventions. A small number of children living some distance from Hackney experience delays in accessing local services to support their mental health, in

some instances social workers could have been more creative in their planning to address these gaps.

27. Children in care make good educational progress as they receive effective support from teachers, their carers and the virtual school. A strong enrichment programme of out of school activities supports children's progress, including opportunities to volunteer abroad. There is robust action when children are not attending school or at risk of exclusion and, as a result, children are helped to improve attendance and behaviour at school. Young people were full of praise for the virtual school staff who are helping them. Children's progress and achievements are regularly celebrated, including the annual 'Epic' awards.
28. Children in care and care leavers get good support to keep themselves safe. However, responses to children missing from care are not consistently robust. In a very small number of cases, there was a lack of prompt coordinated planning to locate children and ensure they are protected. Most children benefit from effective interventions and return home conversations.
29. Support for foster carers is strong, with a comprehensive training offer and a range of effective support, including regular therapeutic consultations. Foster carers spoke positively of their experience of working as part of the 'Hackney team'. The 'Mockingbird' project has been implemented to address a recent decline in placement stability for children and provides a network of ready support when placements are under pressure. While the recruitment of foster carers which reflect all of the borough's diverse faith communities continues to present a challenge, there is careful planning by social workers to meet children's cultural needs within available placements. Recruitment campaigns for foster carers within targeted communities is ongoing.
30. Children benefit from a consistent offer of advocacy from children's rights officers through their reviews, although not all care leavers spoken to were fully aware of the service. Some children benefit from long-term relationships with independent visitors.
31. Children's participation is increasing, particularly for older care leavers. While several recruitment and commissioning exercises have included children in care council representatives, opportunities to speak directly to senior leaders and members have not been sufficiently frequent. Young people told inspectors they did not really feel 'heard'. The creation of a dedicated participation officer is starting to address the very low number of school-age children who participate in the children in care council.
32. The needs of young people who are unaccompanied minors are well addressed, including the development of supported lodgings with foster carers and access to therapeutic support to help young people come to terms with their traumatic pasts. However, not all young people are fully clear about how and where they can access support.

33. Care leavers receive a strong service from dedicated and experienced social workers. Young people are supported to live in accommodation that is appropriate for them and that provides them with security and stability. Senior leaders and members have responded to fewer 18-year-olds 'staying put' with their foster carers, and have recently increased the allowances and support available to carers to increase capacity for young people.
34. The health needs of care leavers are identified and addressed, and health histories are shared with young people at their final care planning review. A range of timely therapeutic support is provided for care leavers, including support for those who are parents, to help them build positive attachments with their children.
35. The good progress made by care leavers is demonstrated in the timely reviews of their pathway plans. Most care leavers are receiving regular visits from social workers who are persistent in staying in touch. However, for a very small number of young people, visits were not sufficiently frequent, including visits to some care leavers in custody.
36. The virtual school provides strong support to help care leavers into education, employment or training. As a result, rates of engagement of young people are above the national and local averages. There are a small number of established apprenticeships and internships within the council, and inspectors heard directly from young people how much they value these opportunities.

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

37. The effectiveness of the work of leaders in Hackney has declined since the previous inspection. An experienced chief executive and stable senior leadership team recognise that necessary changes in practice require a cultural and systemic response. The culture is an innovative one. However, leaders recognise that there is more to do to ensure that the focus on innovation is balanced with close attention to the core day-to-day business of helping and protecting children. There is a culture that is strongly supportive to parents and social workers. However, the necessary questioning and challenge about how interventions are making a difference to children's lived experience did not always take place. The steps taken by senior leaders to improve services for children in need of help and protection have resulted in some recent improvements in practice and management oversight.
38. There continues to be strong political and corporate support for children's services. Elected members have ensured ongoing investment in children's services and have protected non-statutory early help services. A dynamic and experienced lead member is providing renewed scrutiny and challenge to the senior leadership team following the focused visit earlier in the year. Strategic

planning for children's services is aligned well with wider corporate planning, helping to ensure that children's services are given a high priority at the corporate centre. There is more to do to ensure that the voices of children in care and those leaving care can inform and influence strategic planning.

39. Partnerships across Hackney are well developed at a strategic level. The local authority has worked openly and transparently with the safeguarding partnership to ensure that the necessary improvements are starting to be made following the focused visit by Ofsted. Joint work across the partnership has not, however, consistently translated into operational improvement, for example recognising the quality of agency contributions to strategy discussions or having effective oversight of the quality of practice regarding privately fostered children.
40. Elected members and leaders are committed and aspirational corporate parents, as demonstrated by the ongoing investment in services that improve children's outcomes right from the start of them entering care. The corporate parenting strategy has recently been updated following engagement with a range of stakeholders, including the children in care council, and reaffirms the responsibilities of corporate parents across the council. Leaders have responded to a need to improve placement stability for children in care by strengthening commissioning of placements and the provision of support to carers, such as the Mockingbird Model.
41. However, young people in care have only attended one corporate parenting board within the last year in order to influence key decision-making at a corporate level. There are clear plans to develop this further and ensure that younger children in care are better represented. Young people are helping service improvements, including the recommissioning of the contact service and the commissioning of accommodation providers. Members have ensured that there are work opportunities across departments in the council, as the 'family firm', for children in care and care leavers.
42. The quality of oversight and decision-making that managers provide is not consistently effective. While there is stronger management grip for children in care, weaker practice for children in need of help and protection is not always recognised or challenged, and delays in making changes for children are not always addressed decisively. Some improvements are only very recently starting to make a difference for children on longer-term child protection plans. The quality of oversight of children's cases within monthly case discussions at social work unit meetings is inconsistent, and some discussions lack a clear focus on the child. Meetings do not always provide challenge when plans for children are not progressing, and there is a lack of routine oversight of decision-making by consultant social workers on their own allocated cases.
43. The self-evaluation of practice is largely accurate, but does not recognise all of the areas for improvement found within this inspection, notably the poor quality of initial strategy discussions, weaker practice for some children in pre-

proceedings and the weak practice in ensuring that privately fostered children are being cared for safely. However, leaders have acted to improve services when they have identified other areas of decline, for example the disabled children's service. They have also robustly challenged partners to improve the timeliness of the assessment of health needs of children in care.

44. Leaders know their communities well and continue to commission a range of services which are making a real difference to the majority of children, including the clinical service and the domestic abuse intervention service.
45. There is a reflective culture within Hackney, and managers have implemented learning from best practice of other authorities, have invited external reviews and have sought feedback from children and families. The annual complaints report contains detailed exploration of patterns and trends, and learning points are distributed to staff through bulletins and social work unit meetings. However, at times, the range of reflection does not always result in clear action until there is a pressing or serious concern.
46. A much-improved suite of live performance data is helping to drive improvements in key areas such as the timeliness of children's assessments and the frequency of social work visits to children. First-line managers now have the tools to maintain oversight of performance within teams. This is a marked improvement from the findings of the focused visit. However, weekly discussions of performance data do not consistently involve further qualitative analysis of all areas of practice. Some quality and practice issues have not been recognised, for instance the positive reporting of 'involvement' of partners in strategy discussions did not link with consideration of the quality of practice and decision-making.
47. Quality assurance is not yet consistently driving improvement to frontline practice across the whole service. Thematic issues from audit findings are used well to inform wider workforce development. Case audits challenge very poor practice and ensure that swift remedial action is taken where necessary. However, the approach of auditors is too inconsistent: some take an overly optimistic view of practice and are overly focused on process. Feedback from audits is too reticent in identifying and acting on areas of weaker practice, for example audits of privately fostered children. Actions arising from audits are not all systematically followed through to ensure sustained and wider improvements in practice. The recently produced 'Practice Standards' document sets out minimum expectations of compliance and management oversight, with links to policies, procedures and best practice examples. It does not, however, assist staff in understanding the quality of practice, for instance the need for early contingency planning in pre-proceedings work.
48. While most social work units have manageable workloads, a small number have high caseloads due to a combination of a very recent increase in demand and staff absence. A very small number of workers reported feeling overwhelmed by

the level of casework. Leaders took immediate steps to address the high caseloads during the inspection, initiating the recruitment of additional temporary social workers where necessary.

49. Morale is high among frontline social workers, who feel valued by accessible and supportive managers and leaders. Social workers value the administrative support and weekly reflective case discussions, which are integral to the model of social work units. Social workers and first-line managers are supported to develop professionally through a variety of learning and training opportunities which are discussed in regular 'check-in' sessions. Staff turnover is significantly lower than most boroughs within the city, and almost all first-line managers are permanent, which contributes to the stability of positive relationships with children and families.



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