

City of London

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 2 March 2020 to 6 March 2020

Lead inspector: Matt Reed
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

Children's services in the City of London are outstanding. Children benefit from a strong and highly effective social work service which has continued to significantly improve since the previous inspection. Senior leaders and council members have been proactive in addressing new challenges and improving services, particularly those for children in care and care leavers. The needs of children are consistently prioritised and valued and are effectively addressed in a timely way. Social workers are very well trained and highly skilled. They are able to form meaningful, long-standing and trusting relationships with children that improve the children's experiences and progress. The unique circumstances of the service, comprising of one social work team that is working with children from new referrals to care leavers, means that the circumstances of individual children are well known. Their views are sought and clearly influence service improvements.

Corporate parenting within the City is very strong, and there is a high commitment throughout the service to ensuring a personalised response to individual need. The majority of children in care and care leavers are unaccompanied asylum-seeking

children, and the children benefit greatly from a service which is very sensitive to their individual needs and prior experiences. The service is committed to addressing and minimising further childhood trauma and is highly ambitious for their children. Children's life chances are improving as a result.

Senior leaders have a clear and ambitious vision for vulnerable children and families that delivers outstanding services to benefit children and their families. Moreover, there is a commitment to further improvement and continual learning. The workforce is greatly valued and very well supported to ensure that ongoing, highly effective services are consistently provided to children and families.

What needs to improve

- The management overview of families stepped down to early help to ensure that families receive help within a timescale that is right for them.
- The recording of management decision-making at all stages of a child's journey.

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

1. Children in need of help and protection within the City of London receive a good service that is proportionate to their needs and enables them to effect positive change. Risks to children are minimised and, where required, additional support is provided to prevent concerns from escalating. Work is appropriately held within early help, and there is evidence of good direct work with families to effect change. There is effective engagement with partner agencies to support individual families, and, strategically, to develop the early help service further.
2. For a small number of families, there has been a delay in receiving the right service within early help. At present, the local authority is maintaining records of early help services outside of the electronic recording system. As a consequence, early help assessments are not part of the data reporting set presented to managers. This means that once a referral has been progressed to early help or once it has been stepped down, a report is not yet available to identify how quickly families are seen and to ensure that all families are receiving help within a timescale that is right for them.
3. Thresholds are well understood, and are supported by comprehensive and clear guidance. The social work team responds well to new contacts and referrals and it is able to monitor these effectively to ensure oversight and planning. Decision-making by managers for new referrals is timely, robust and proportionate to the level of concern. There is clear, recorded rationale for all decisions made.

4. When children are identified as being at risk, strategy meetings are convened in a timely manner and are well attended by professionals, who provide relevant information to inform decision-making. Decisions following these meetings and any subsequent enquiries are clearly recorded by managers to facilitate effective interventions with families.
5. Assessments of children's needs are of a high standard. They are comprehensive, give a clear analysis of the children's needs and clearly identify potential risks. Children's views are consistently taken into account and are included in subsequent planning. Where children have additional needs and are disabled, these needs are thoroughly assessed to ensure that the most appropriate support is provided to the child and family. Additional vulnerabilities associated with disability are well considered to facilitate a proportionate response to concerns raised. There is good multi-agency attendance at meetings to ensure effective planning and review for children.
6. Services and interventions with children and families are well planned, and social workers clearly articulate the purpose of their involvement and the work they are completing. Most children's circumstances improve because of these interventions, but, for a minority of children, the recording of plans could improve. While the vast majority of children have plans on their files, for a very small number these are absent. Child in need and child protection plans detail children's needs, and this focuses work to reduce risks and provide support. However, there are some plans where recorded timescales on individual actions could be tighter in order to minimise the potential for drift in planning and to ensure that families are not subject to interventions for longer than required.
7. The local authority ensures that partner agencies are assisted in order to understand their safeguarding responsibilities. This work is supported by a designated officer, who delivers training and clear advice in response to concerns raised.
8. Overall management oversight is very effective. Supervision notes are detailed, evidencing reflection on the child's circumstances and a recording of actions to progress plans. However, there is a need to ensure that management oversight is clearly recorded on all children's files. Some records were missing, and, at times, the rationale for management decision-making was not clear in order to enable an understanding of the decisions made at every point of a child's journey.
9. Relationships with children are clearly prioritised. Children are seen regularly, and within timescales which are in accordance to their needs. Social workers know the children extremely well and the local authority's focus on relationship-based practice facilitates the development of long-term, purposeful relationships. Children are seen alone during visits, and their views are clearly recorded. Direct work with children demonstrates that social

workers are able to effectively use the tools they have learned from their training in systemic practice. This has resulted in children being able to form positive relationships and share information about their lives, which has helped inform their plans. Where appropriate, children are encouraged to attend or send views to meetings to inform future planning and to ensure that they have influence over their own lives.

10. Given the size and location of the local authority, with its relatively small resident population of children and young people, wider risks associated with exploitation are uncommon. In recognition of this fact, the service has been proactive in ensuring that steps have been taken to raise awareness within the partnership to identify and facilitate an effective response should concerns arise. Potential issues linked to particular characteristics of the area have been identified, and research has been commissioned on affluent neglect and a conference has been facilitated on online safety. There is a well-led focus on ensuring that children are in and remain in education, and that any vulnerabilities in relation to children being educated at home are identified and acted on in a timely way.
11. Responses to children who go missing are robust, and processes and procedures are followed and escalated to senior managers when required. There is a clear understanding of the additional vulnerabilities of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) who go missing, and the potential for exploitation and trafficking and significant efforts made to locate them quickly.

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

12. Children in care and care leavers are extremely well supported within the local authority to ensure that their experiences improve and they are able to progress. Most children in care and care leavers are children who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum. There is a prompt response taken by the local authority as a corporate parent to progress a plan for children to be in their care. Commitment to ensuring that their needs are met is demonstrated at all levels. This includes senior leaders, councillors, health partners and the children's social workers, and results in an extremely good level of service being available to children who have often experienced trauma prior to their arrival to this country.
13. The overwhelming majority of children's plans are clear, address their assessed needs well and are ambitious for their future. Children in care reviews are timely, and most children are supported to participate in the review meetings. Interpreters are actively sought and sourced to allow children to fully understand what is happening, what their plans are, and that their voices are heard. Children are often visited in between their review by

independent reviewing officers (IROs) to ensure that care plans remain appropriate and actions from reviews are being completed in a timely way. The IROs get to know the children well and advocate strongly for them. Children in care reviews are written personally to the child, in a clear and sensitive style, which enables them to understand what was agreed.

14. The local authority is a founder member of a regional adoption agency (Ambitious for Adoption) and is fully committed to its operation. When adoption is the plan for permanence, this is progressed in a timely way, with careful matching to enable positive outcomes for children.
15. Children are visited by their social workers at a frequency that meets their needs and are often contacted in between visits. When needed, an interpreter is always organised to enable the children's voice to be clearly heard and understood. Their views are articulated well within their plans and reviews. Social workers demonstrate great sensitivity to the cultural needs and identities of the children and explain very carefully what they are entitled to, supporting them to receive their entitlements.
16. All children in care and care leavers are offered an advocate and many take up this independent support. Independent visitors also provide valuable ongoing support to children, many of whom do not have any family members available to support them in this country.
17. All children in care and care leavers are considered as part of the children in care council unless they do not wish to be so. There are regular events, where children in care and care leavers attend both fun activities and informative sessions, which promotes their well-being. There is a creative and imaginative approach to these activities, and resultant suggestions on service improvements by the children have clearly influenced wider service delivery.
18. There is extremely strong involvement and interest from council members and leaders, who often meet directly with the young people and show real interest in their lives, celebrating their achievements and demonstrating commitment to meeting individual needs through the funding of bespoke services. They recognise the specific needs of the young people in their care and strive to do their best for them.
19. Children in care and care leavers receive good support to access services to help improve their physical and mental health. The vast majority of health assessments are timely, and social workers and health professionals ensure that children access these so that they can quickly identify any health needs and services required.
20. There is particular sensitivity shown regarding cultural and diversity issues of asylum-seeking children and an understanding shown regarding their journey. Support for their emotional health is available through child and adolescent

mental health services (CAMHs) and, where necessary, funding is available for more bespoke services. Social workers show a good understanding of the individual needs of the children they work with, often suggesting activities which support them to improve their confidence and self-esteem, and this impacts positively upon their mental health. Care leavers are given their health histories in a written format, and this is translated to ensure that it is understood.

21. Children in care are very well supported to enable them to access leisure activities. Individual interests are well considered, and are creatively supported in order to enrich children's lives. The local authority, as a corporate parent, has ensured that some children have an opportunity to access a holiday.
22. The virtual school is creative, relentless and effective in its work with other professionals and external partners to ensure that the growing cohort of children in care do well. Children make good progress in their learning and grow in confidence. This is due in no small measure to the careful and timely attention paid to their individual needs and the excellent support they receive, for example at the weekly local tuition and enrichment classes. This paves the way for meaningful engagement with education, employment and training opportunities. The majority have good attendance at all education and enrichment classes, and they engage in their learning. The low drop-out rate in college reflects the secure grounding they have had, the effective support they receive and their own commitment to learning.
23. Children enjoy a rich range of opportunities which open the doors to the arts, culture and sport. Some opportunities are noteworthy, such as the joint project with boys from a local independent school. This has had a palpable impact on both groups of children, who get to learn from each other's experiences and cultures. Personal education plans are of good quality and are purposeful. The vast majority of care leavers are in education or employment, and the local authority is ambitious for them and supports those who wish to attend university.
24. Given the unique circumstances within the City, almost all children in care and care leavers live outside of the local authority area. The local authority works hard to ensure that children are not disadvantaged by this. There are clear and effective arrangements in place for commissioning foster placements. The monitoring of these is detailed and focused, providing a thorough oversight of the quality of the service and contributing to effective placements that meet children's needs. Although some care leavers live in unregulated placements, these are carefully considered via a robust quality assurance process, with the local authority visiting placements to ensure that they are suitable to meet the needs of the children.

25. As children begin their transition to independence, this is planned well with perceptive, careful consideration of individual needs and circumstances. Pathway plans are well written and written with the young people. This results in clear plans, which are understood by the young people, reviewed on a regular basis and meet their needs. Children's wishes about where they'd like to live after 18 are considered, and, as a result, some are supported to stay living with their foster carer.
26. All care leavers are given priority on the local authority housing list, and support is given to secure a tenancy. However, great sensitivity is shown to care leavers who are not ready to move on to full independent living, and some remain appropriately in semi-independent provision beyond 18 in order to enable them to develop the skills and confidence they require prior to moving.

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

27. High-quality services for children and families have been sustained for some time. In some areas, particularly in relation to children in care and care leavers, services have improved, resulting in positive experiences and progress for young people. Leaders have been responsive to the challenges of significant increases of children in care and care leavers and are committed to continuous learning to ensure that these effective services are available on an ongoing basis.
28. Senior leaders and managers at all levels know the service well, and there is a detailed understanding of what is happening in individual children's lives. Children's needs are prioritised, and there is a clear motivation to do the right thing to facilitate positive experiences for all children. This is enabling them to make progress in many aspects of their life. The services for children in care have improved because of committed and effective leadership. Good relationships with key agencies ensure that needs are promoted, and practitioners are able to work effectively with children and families. Key innovations with partners, particularly the enrichment programme with a local independent school, are providing opportunities. This is having a significant impact on the lives of a number of young people.
29. This is a learning organisation that is open to external scrutiny and committed to continuous improvement. This is evident in an accurate self-assessment, which details a thorough understanding of the local community, the progress that has been made and a recognition of the need for ongoing improvement. There is a clear understanding of both the benefits and challenges that are faced by a local authority with some unique characteristics. Independent audits and quality assurance work have clearly influenced service improvements and practice delivery, demonstrating a willingness to learn and

to continue to progress. The move from a service improvement board to an achieving excellence board, utilising external independent support to achieve excellence, is further evidence of an ambition to excel and not settle for maintaining consistently good services.

30. The significant changes in the cohort of children who have come to the attention of the service are well understood. The decision to work with additional numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rather than subject them to an additional, potentially traumatic change in circumstances is significant and worthy of note. It demonstrates a sensitivity in service planning which is meeting the needs of children and young people. This has been supported throughout the organisation, and there is a thorough understanding by all senior managers and council members of their responsibilities. The lead member and deputy chair of the safeguarding sub-committee demonstrated an impressive knowledge of children's services, taking a proactive approach to meeting young people to facilitate greater understanding of individual circumstances.
31. The City is acting as an enthusiastic and responsible corporate parent who is ambitious for their young people and committed to ensuring that their life chances are improved. The achievements of children in care and care leavers are celebrated.
32. There is an active children in care council and the views of children and their families are actively sought, and learning is taken from their input. The voices of children are valued, listened to and, most importantly, acted on.
33. The increase in demand is well understood through effective performance management and monitoring. There has been good corporate support to ensure that the service can meet its responsibilities and more. When needs arise that cannot be met, services are commissioned to ensure sufficient capacity to meet the needs of all children. Rigorous quality assurance and monitoring of independent providers means that children are safeguarded and only live in placements that will meet their needs and enable them to progress.
34. Additional staff have been employed, and management capacity has been increased through the development of the deputy team manager role, in order to enable ongoing, purposeful and effective work with children. Although there are some gaps identified in recorded management decision-making, overall oversight of practice is strong and effective. Supervision records demonstrate that practitioners are given the opportunity to reflect, and there is clear practice direction. The service has been responsive to recent absences, and additional measures put in place to ensure effective oversight of practice remain ongoing.

35. Social work caseloads, although more variable recently, are manageable, and this is allowing social workers to develop strong relationships with children. Social workers know the children very well, and have worked with some for a long period. This continuity enables positive and trusted relationships to develop, and children feel well supported.
36. This is further enhanced by the investment in a relationship-based systemic model of practice which is becoming more embedded in the work of practitioners. The practice standards are detailed, and they set out clear expectations of how work with families should be approached. These are consistently met to a high standard.
37. Social workers are well supported. They do good work, which is making a difference to children's lives. They have access to ongoing developmental opportunities to ensure that they are able to maintain high-quality practice to improve the lives of vulnerable children and families.



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