

Inspection of Sutton local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 10 December 2021

Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin, 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	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Children in the London Borough of Sutton receive a good service. Leaders and managers have strengthened and consolidated the effective work that was taking place at the time of the previous inspection in 2016. They have worked relentlessly and systematically with partner agencies to successfully deliver an aspirational children's services transformation programme, despite the exceptional challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their passion and ambition to 'do the right thing' for children are tangible, with impressive improvements in recent years.

Leaders have consciously created a highly supportive environment and have adopted a model of practice in which the safety and welfare of children are prioritised. They have focused on modelling behaviours that have created a culture of continuous learning, professional accountability and responsibility devoid of blame, where staff at all levels feel valued, safe and supported. Consequently, children receive effective help, care and protection, tailored to their individually assessed needs by skilled and caring staff across all teams. This is making a real difference to the majority of children's lives.

Pragmatic leaders know their services well and they are unstinting in their efforts to improve. However, some weaknesses in services to care leavers remain. Leaders accept that the quality of work in this service needs to progress more quickly. In addition, they recognise that arrangements for the completion and analysis of return home interviews when children are missing from home or care are not strong enough.

What needs to improve?

- The quality of practice and earlier planning to meet the needs of care leavers.
- Leaders' knowledge and understanding about what happens to children when they go missing from home or care.

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

1. Established and mature partnerships in the recently restructured early help services are reducing the escalation of harm to children. Judicious investment and action by leaders, aligned to the transformation strategy, are successfully 'pooling' specialist practitioners with children's social care, youth services and youth justice teams. As a result, experienced staff with an array of relevant skills and the necessary expertise provide children and their parents with timely access to integrated services. For instance, the edge of care and adolescent team, now merged with early help, provides intensive support to exploited children, reducing the number of professionals involved. While changes are still embedding, there is already a reduction in repeat referrals, with children receiving the right level of help from the most appropriate practitioner.
2. Thresholds are understood well by professionals and most children requiring a statutory service are promptly referred to the local authority children first contact service (CFCS). Levels of risk are prioritised appropriately and the rationale for decisions is recorded clearly. Children at risk of immediate harm are responded to immediately. Strategy discussions take place on the same day in the reconfigured locality teams and result in appropriate multi-agency actions. Exceptionally high volumes of referrals when the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted, and pressure on capacity in CFCS, have caused delay for a small number of children assessed by managers as being at low risk. In response to this, a project board chaired by a senior leader is reviewing this service.
3. CFCS staff undertake proportionate checks with other agencies, seeking parental consent if appropriate. Risks and strengths for children are identified and carefully analysed, and decisions are consistently informed by previous history. Professionals work collaboratively to share information, mitigating risk and ensuring that children receive the right level of help and protection. For example, the multi-agency meeting for domestic abuse (MAMDA) is attended by relevant professionals, who identify tailored support to protect victims of domestic violence and their children. Further integration of this service into CFCS is planned, following a small number of weaknesses in the system being identified during the inspection.
4. Emergency duty support for children and families is provided in collaboration with four other London boroughs, and information-sharing with day services is managed well by CFCS. A reduced social work out-of-hours staffing resource is supplemented by a commissioned service to ensure that, if children need to

come into care, they are supported by social care staff and not taken to foster care by police officers.

5. Rigorous management oversight of children's social work across teams and services ensures that children's experiences are central to timely decision-making about the next steps needed to help and protect them from harm. Caseloads are manageable. Although there have been changes of staff, most children have been able to form positive relationships with their social workers. Children also benefit from additional alternative support services, including mentoring and therapeutic help.
6. Assessments demonstrate a resolute emphasis on understanding the impact of parental capacity and behaviour on children. Risks and strengths are carefully analysed. Children's voices are evident throughout assessments and social workers work hard to engage and develop trusting relationships with children that enable them to tell their story. The majority of children who are subject to child protection and child in need planning receive good protection, support and help. Social workers are fittingly proud when children make progress and risks reduce.
7. Good attendance at core groups and robust multi-agency reviews enable proportionate escalation to care proceedings if risk is not reducing swiftly enough or change is not sustained. Effective practice with parents and children is successfully diverting children from care. Clearly written 'letters before proceedings' ensure that parents understand social workers' concerns. When necessary, care proceedings are initiated quickly to ensure that children are not subject to neglect or left in other unsatisfactory conditions for too long.
8. Children with complex additional needs are benefiting from the reintegration of the disabled children's team into children's social care, which has led to improved services. Assessments are comprehensive and child-focused, prepared by committed and skilled practitioners who capture the family history and current needs well. Disabled children are visited regularly by their social workers both in school and at home, which helps workers to understand their daily lives. The impact on brothers and sisters of caring for a child with complex needs and disabilities is sensitively identified; appropriate services of support and direct work are undertaken with them as a child in need in their own right or as a young carer. Disabled children in need and child protection plans are appropriately detailed, with clear expectations of what needs to change between review meetings.
9. Vulnerable adolescents are well supported by social workers and a variety of specialist services which meet their needs. Screening tools are used and identify concerns and risks well. These findings are routinely reviewed and updated to reflect change in situations and circumstances. Children with poor mental health are supported and encouraged to engage with mental health services, and additional specialist services are explored for those who have experienced significant trauma in their childhoods. However, work to understand and to analyse the risks when children go missing from home is underdeveloped.

10. Children who are electively home educated and those missing from school benefit from effective management oversight and interventions. Appropriate action is taken when safeguarding issues are identified.

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

11. Most children in care in Sutton continue to benefit from consistently good support from highly committed, ambitious and caring social workers and foster carers. Children come into care when they need to, and they are supported to return to their families when it is safe to do so. Permanence planning and stability for children in care are good. Staff at all levels work tirelessly to help children to achieve in life and to protect them from further harm. Consequently, the majority are making good progress. Children spoke eloquently to inspectors about the help and support that they receive.
12. Social workers visit children often and see them alone, often more frequently than identified in their care plan, so that important direct work and life-story work can be undertaken. This is helping children to understand their unique journey. Social workers advocate for children's rights. All staff speak highly and with passion about their children; they are proud of them and work hard to support them to realise their ambitions.
13. Children's cultural, religious and language needs are carefully considered. Most children live with carers who reflect their individual and diverse needs. For example, trafficked children live with foster carers who have the same first language; they are enabled to build enough trust to share their traumatic experiences and receive therapeutic help more quickly. All children have regular access to interpreters when needed.
14. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are highly effective in supporting all children in care. IROs consistently participate in key meetings, ensuring independent scrutiny and bringing effective challenge to planning for children. 'All About Me' reviews use clear language that is written directly to the child. As a result, children know why they are in care, how they can stay in touch with their family members and who is responsible for making sure that they remain safe.
15. Children's care plans are detailed and thorough, reflecting the child's aspirations and wishes. Children live in homes where they feel safe, and most are making positive progress. They live with their brothers and sisters as appropriate, and with extended family or carers, who provide them with emotional warmth and stability. Good use is made of family group conferences and special guardians, enabling all children to live with family members when it is assessed as suitable.
16. Foster carers and adopters are very positive about the support that they receive. A comprehensive range of training helps them to understand their role and provides high-quality support for children. Foster carers and prospective applicants told inspectors that they greatly appreciate the support that they

have received throughout the pandemic. They value their supervising social workers and feel comfortable seeking support.

17. A collaborative approach with the regional adoption agency targets effectively the recruitment of prospective adopters, who reflect the diverse local community. There has been an increase in adoptions over the last year, despite the challenges of COVID-19, increasing the numbers of children in Sutton who have been provided with a stable home and family.
18. Family time for children is promoted, ensuring that children maintain their relationships with their support networks. Some exceptional work has been carried out by social workers, who understand the importance of this for children and their families. Disabled children in care are encouraged and supported to express their views and wishes, which are integral to their 'All About Me' review. Transition planning for children with complex needs is considered early, and social workers speak highly and proudly of the progress that children make.
19. The virtual school team and partners work extremely well together to ensure that children in care receive the support that they need to succeed. As a result, most children make positive and swift progress once they enter care. For example, many become more confident, improve their personal presentation and make faster academic progress. Many children benefit from additional support that helps their well-being and academic progress, for example, through mentoring and individual tuition.
20. Designated teachers speak positively about the excellent safeguarding support and guidance provided by local authority staff. Personal education plans are of good quality and reflect the views of children well. Reviews of children's progress are well attended by social workers, foster carers, the virtual school and designated teachers. Pupil premium funding is well targeted to support the personal and academic growth of children. Children benefit from a wide and varied enrichment programme that helps them to develop their personal and social skills beyond the academic curriculum.
21. Children at risk of exploitation receive an effective multi-agency response to protect them from harm. Early information-sharing and intelligence-gathering help to track and map perpetrators. Clearly written records demonstrate that social workers understand the individual children and their specific vulnerabilities. However, when children go missing from care, not all are offered a timely return home interview, including those children living out of the local area. This is a missed opportunity to assess current risks to children to help to inform timely safety planning.
22. While improving, the pace of change for care experienced young people has not been quick enough. Some care leavers have had too many changes of their personal advisers (PAs). Care leavers said that this reduces their ability to build trust and has a negative impact on their emotional health and well-being, as they have had to repeat their stories. In order to reduce the number of changes in workers, the children in care and care leavers' teams have recently merged as part of the transformation strategy. However, it is too soon to evaluate the

impact of these changes. Transition planning for care leavers does not happen early enough, as PAs are only introduced when children turn 18.

23. Action by managers to improve the pay and conditions for PAs is having a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of staff in this service. Many care experienced young people benefit from work by PAs, who are persistent in keeping in touch. The majority of PAs know their young people well.
24. Some care leavers do not fully understand and know their rights and entitlements. Most are not aware of the local offer available to them, and they have an insufficient voice at the children in care council. Senior leaders are taking action to tackle these weaknesses.
25. Children in care and care leavers are very positive about 'The Quad', a well-resourced, welcoming and specifically designated resource where they can cook a meal, do their washing and meet together for support. At the time of the inspection, young people were all involved in decorating The Quad for Christmas.
26. Care leavers receive positive and timely practical help and guidance from their easy-to-reach PAs, who are based in The Quad. A variety of support, including advice on how to navigate the benefits systems, is available. Although limited during lockdown, care leavers have access to a good range of commissioned supplementary services and projects to support them in preparing for adulthood. Care leavers who are parents, including those living out of the area, are well supported.
27. Most pathway plans are detailed and consider care leavers' holistic needs, wishes and feelings. Young people are encouraged and supported to engage in further education and learning; those who attend university have their rent covered. Care leavers seeking employment are provided with support with their applications, interview preparation and the purchase of clothing for interviews.
28. Care leavers are routinely provided with their health passports. PAs are creative in seeking the right support to meet young people's emotional and mental health needs. Prior to the pandemic, a specialist worker provided drop-in sessions at The Quad. However, this worker has now left and the sessions have stopped. Counselling services are available, but there are long waiting times, which continue to increase. Older care leavers experiencing more complex mental ill-health have problems accessing adult mental health services. This is exacerbated when they live out of area.
29. Most care leavers have been involved in choosing their accommodation and they speak positively about it. Their council tax is paid for by Sutton Council. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers are positive about the help, support and assistance that they receive for their emotional and physical well-being. Care leavers are supported for as long is necessary, including beyond their 25th birthday if required.

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

30. Highly impressive and aspirational corporate and operational leaders work relentlessly to ensure that children and their families in Sutton benefit from good and effective services, keeping them safer. Shared priorities are communicated clearly across the council. Since the previous inspection, and despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders, together with partner agencies, have forged ahead and delivered an ambitious transformation programme, improving services for vulnerable children and their families. A realistic action plan to further improve services for care leavers and for those missing from home and care is in place.
31. Stability of leadership and strong aspirations to 'get it right' are key factors in their success. A strong culture of continuous learning and support to staff is bringing greater consistency of management oversight. Practitioners' effective and authoritative practice leads to better outcomes for the majority of children. Most vulnerable children receive good help and effective care and protection that are making a difference to their lives.
32. The senior leadership team has an excellent understanding of its services, both the strengths and areas for improvement. Performance management is a key priority, underpinned by accurate performance management information, effective quality assurance activity and the views of their staff, children and professional partners. Leaders readily engage in internal and external reviews and challenge and respond quickly to meet changing needs and demands for services. Staff told inspectors that the director of children's services (DCS), together with the assistant director, models behaviours that create a culture of professional accountability and responsibility devoid of blame, where staff at all levels feel valued, safe and supported.
33. Partnerships based on mutual respect are extremely strong. The vision of 'putting children first' is shared corporately and across the political spectrum. The chief executive and the DCS recognise and prioritise all aspects of children's needs, including education and learning, career and work opportunities, and housing. Elected members actively participate in safeguarding training, promoting high aspirations for children in the local authority's care. Effective governance arrangements are firmly in place, ensuring that the senior leadership team and elected members communicate regularly and effectively.
34. Sutton's leaders are fully cognisant of the challenges in recruiting qualified social workers across London. A comprehensive and effective workforce recruitment and retention strategy includes a successful 'growing our own' initiative, supporting non-qualified staff to qualify through the social work degree apprenticeship programme. In addition, a well-established programme for newly qualified staff and a successful overseas recruitment campaign are impressive in attracting and retaining staff. For instance, a number of

Zimbabwean social workers have been promoted to become frontline team managers.

35. Staff consistently describe feeling well supported in their work and in their professional development by highly visible, approachable and involved managers at every level, who take the time and trouble to nurture talent. Morale is good. All staff have access to and are given the time and space to attend training specific to their role and responsibilities. For instance, restorative practice training is available to staff across all teams. Supervision is frequent and mostly effective. Caseloads are manageable, enabling an environment where social workers across the breadth of children's social care have the time to listen to children, to consider their unique and diverse needs and to take action to help and safeguard them from harm.
36. The achievements of children in care and care leavers are celebrated by leaders and staff at an annual awards ceremony. Staff understand the isolation felt by many care leavers and leaders host Christmas lunch for them on Christmas Day. During lockdown, they ensured that all young people not with families or friends had a Christmas dinner delivered. They are planning to resume their face-to-face celebrations this year.

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