

Inspection of Richmond upon Thames local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 31 January to 4 February 2022

Lead inspector: Louise Hocking, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
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 Richmond upon Thames who need help, protection and care continue to receive a good service. Dedicated leaders and managers work tirelessly to protect children and to evaluate and improve services provided to them. A comprehensive quality assurance system helps to ensure they have an accurate understanding of children's experiences. Since the last inspection, in 2017, they have strengthened preventative early help work and put additional services in place to support children's mental health and emotional well-being. Contextual safeguarding has been considerably strengthened.

Practitioners show skill and resilience in engaging and supporting children and their families. They are supported well to provide safe and mostly strong services to children, despite the exceptional challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. An increase in demand at the single point of access has led to some pressure on the referral and assessment team and the safeguarding team. Leaders have put additional resources in place to support the continuation of good work for children.

Informed senior leaders and operational managers have continued to prioritise the needs of children, ensuring appropriate application of thresholds and offering a wide range of support and services.

What needs to improve?

- Work with partners to improve the quality of contacts and referrals at the 'front door'.
- Sufficiency of homes for children.
- The experience and support for families involved in 'foster to adopt'.
- How direct work and the child's voice are evident in children's case records.

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

1. Continuous investment and focus on early help services in Richmond has led to impactful preventative work and strong practice for children and families. Early help services are well resourced and offer a wide range of support services and projects. Children's needs are identified well and further specialist assessments provided if required. The introduction of resilience network meetings in January 2021 has supported helpful multi-agency work with children and families.
2. The single point of access (SPA) is an effective and responsive front door that provides a timely service for children and their families. A steady increase in contacts and referrals means that the needs of many more children have to be fully assessed. While it is a busy service, it is sufficiently well resourced to respond promptly and appropriately. Practitioners are skilled, thoughtful and reflective. They are suitably trained and supported well in their different roles within the service. Re-referral rates are low in comparison to other similar local authority areas.
3. Thresholds to access services on behalf of children are understood well by professionals. Children who require a statutory service are appropriately referred to the local authority's children's services. Those whose needs are below the threshold for statutory support are helpfully signposted to early help services. The local authority is in the process of recruiting an early help coordinator who will be based in the SPA, to further enhance the interface between early help and statutory social care.
4. The quality of the information provided by some partner agencies is variable, with, on occasion, a lack of clarity on the presenting needs. This means that practitioners in the SPA have to spend additional time returning to referring partners to clarify the detail of any concern.
5. Management oversight in the SPA is effective and well embedded. All contacts about children are screened immediately by a manager and risk assessed for priority action. Children receive a timely and proportionate response. Practitioners analyse strengths and risks to children well to understand their immediate needs, seek additional information if required and agree the next steps. Their careful analysis ensures that children are referred to a service that will meet their needs within 24 hours. Managers sign off all actions and are a strong, supportive presence for practitioners to discuss any concerns or to help

work through any issues. Parental consent is usually considered, although it is not always clearly recorded.

6. Consideration of children's needs is strengthened by the co-location of partner agencies in the multi-agency safeguarding hub, where the multi-agency partners share information to inform next steps for the child. The child and adolescent mental health service triage team integrated within the SPA provides a proactive first-assessment response to support children's mental health. This adds to the range of responses available to what is a strong front door service.
7. Children in Richmond who need help and protection are seen quickly and any immediate risks are identified and addressed. Consistently strong assessments ensure a good understanding of their needs and of strengths, risks and uncertainties. Assessments are well informed by the child's history and conclude with an appropriate and clear recommendation for any next steps. Active intervention begins immediately and children do not wait to receive a service.
8. An increase in referrals over the last six months, particularly in the last three months, has placed additional demand on services. This has had an impact on the referral and assessment team and the safeguarding service. Practitioners have continued to protect and prioritise children appropriately while under pressure in relation to the number and complexity of families they work with.
9. Child protection investigations, conferences and core groups take place promptly, with good attendance and engagement from partners supporting decision-making. Collaborative work reduces risk for children. Practitioners work well and creatively to engage with parents, particularly with fathers.
10. Immediate risks for children are responded to with urgency. For new referrals, an immediate strategy discussion between children's social care and the police to agree next steps is followed by a fuller strategy discussion with all relevant partners. There is a small risk that not all relevant information is available from the outset to inform planning. There was no evidence that this two-stage practice had any negative impact on the protection of children. When inspectors raised this during the inspection, the local authority immediately undertook their own live audit to understand the issue more fully and concluded that children's case records do not fully reflect the partnership work that is undertaken.
11. Plans for children are clear, concise and easy to understand. They focus on the key areas of concern, with measurable outcomes. Chairs of child protection conferences make considerable efforts to ensure they are robust and helpful. Strong pre-proceedings practice ensures parents are aware of what is expected of them. This work is overseen diligently by a case progression manager. Care proceedings are initiated promptly when needed, including consideration for younger unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). The local judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service confirm that they see good, well-managed court work with positive input from independent reviewing officers.

12. Increased pressure on services has resulted in the need to prioritise most urgent or concerning work. As a result, a small number of children in need have experienced some drift and delay in planning. Leaders have responded supportively, providing an additional temporary team of social workers to avoid further delay and alleviate pressure.
13. Vulnerable adolescents are particularly well supported, through an impressive adolescent safeguarding service. Assessments undertaken in this part of the service are comprehensive, timely and balanced. Adolescents receive a caring and compassionate response from a professional and well-informed team. Practitioners demonstrate persistence and understanding in their engagement with young people. This strong practice is supported by good, analytical and reflective supervision.
14. Children with complex additional needs and disabilities benefit from a child-focused disabled children's team. Communication is supported well by individual communication passports for children, which assist the practitioners working with them. Detailed plans are underpinned by comprehensive packages of support. Complex health needs are supported well and there is good multi-agency team support around children. Children are not always supported to transition to adulthood at an early enough stage ahead of their 18th birthday. The local authority has put a tracking system in place to monitor this and is aware that there is further work to do to support children's transition.
15. The number of children who are electively home educated has risen sharply over the last two years. An experienced and stable team closely and proactively scrutinises children's circumstances, providing clear guidance to carers and ensuring appropriate oversight. Children missing education are closely monitored, with children kept on the radar where there is potential for concern.
16. An effective local authority designated officer service ensures that risks posed by adults are followed up comprehensively.

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

17. Children in care in Richmond receive good support from skilled, caring and diligent social workers and carers. Children come into care when they need to and they are supported to return to live with their families if this is the best plan for them. They are visited regularly by social workers who know them well and understand their needs.
18. Permanency planning is understood well and long-term plans are secured for children in a timely way. Particular attention is given to options for children to remain living with family and friends if they cannot remain at home. Many benefit from staying within their extended family networks. The special guardianship team works skilfully to analyse and balance any concerns with the known benefits of children living with relatives. Additional investment has resulted in an extra social worker post to undertake regulation 24 assessments to determine the suitability of friends and family.

19. Social workers know children well. They undertake direct work with them, with some evidence of life-story work carried out or planned. Although practitioners engage well with children, this work is not consistently reflected in children's written records, for children or practitioners to read in the future if they wish to.
20. Most children live in suitably matched, stable and secure homes. A high proportion of children looked after in Richmond are aged 16 and over. Ensuring sufficiency of foster placements for this age group is a persistent challenge for the authority. Leaders are working actively to address this and there is a clear vision and leadership within the fostering service. They have refreshed the sufficiency strategy and are investing in the recruitment of more foster carers, including to address the need for a more diverse range of carers.
21. The partnership with the regional adoption agency (Adopt London South) is working well to support the needs of children in Richmond who require adoption. Adopters are positive about their experience and children's plans are made in a timely way. A small number of adopters have felt insufficiently prepared or supported in relation to contested adoption under the 'foster to adopt' scheme.
22. Higher numbers of 16- and 17-year-olds live in supported accommodation than the local authority would like. Some of these children might have benefited from a foster placement. The local authority assesses need and makes suitable and sensible decisions for children. It provides significant investment to ensure that vulnerable young people are well supported. Placements are appropriate and suitable within the range of provision available. Leaders are acutely aware of any limitations of accommodation, even when it has been deemed suitable, and the need to continuously ensure that the packages of support are appropriate for each child's needs.
23. The health needs of children looked after in Richmond are met well. Supporting their mental health and well-being is a particular priority. Leaders have invested in a range of services to ensure children in care and care leavers can access support when they need it. A specialist emotional health permanency service provides a flexible range of consultations, assessments and therapy, with an additional clinician recently recruited. All children referred are currently receiving a service.
24. Targeted action to help children and young people is underpinned by a recently refreshed vulnerable child and adolescent strategy. The contextual safeguarding lead and 'missing champions' help oversee vulnerable children's circumstances. The multi-agency risk vulnerability and exploitation panel targets contextual safeguarding activity that is reducing risk for many children. Specialist services include projects and workers who undertake targeted gangs work and direct intervention for children at risk of sexual exploitation. Strong protective work is undertaken when children are at risk and are missing; practitioners make skilful use of specialist tools to safeguard these children. A specialist team demonstrates strong engagement skills and a good understanding of risk when undertaking return home interviews.

25. An engaged and proactive virtual school results in children receiving a responsive and supportive service that meets their education needs well. The transition hub initiative has had a positive impact on progress, attainment and attendance, with further work being undertaken on attendance. Feedback from designated teachers, foster carers and residential workers about the virtual school is consistently positive. Personal education plans (PEPs) capture the child's voice and ensure that the views of carers and other professionals inform actions taken to support the child's progress. Education targets are appropriate and child-focused. Clear communication and collaboration between the virtual school staff and partners ensure that all children have a completed PEP.
26. Care leavers in Richmond receive an exceptional service. The leaving care team is highly skilled. Practitioners approach all young people in an empathetic and caring manner, while ensuring the widest range of needs are met. The culture of compassion and kindness is modelled convincingly by the managers of this service.
27. Pathway plans are regularly updated and informed by high-quality assessments. These plans are comprehensive and focus on what matters most for care leavers. A separate child-friendly version helps all young people to understand their plan. Culture, religion and identity are given appropriate attention and care leavers benefit from their individual needs being respected and met.
28. Care leavers receive a well-resourced offer that includes practical help to support them in their independence. The work of the Virtual College has helped to achieve a fall in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

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

29. Children in Richmond benefit from strong political and corporate commitment across the council. The chief executive models the high priority given to children through direct support to apprenticeships and through his engagement with the corporate parenting board. Leaders continuously evaluate children's experiences and progress. The director of children's services leads regular quarterly safeguarding meetings with the leader of the council, the lead member for children's services and the chief executive to ensure they are fully briefed and can address organisational challenges.
30. Corporate parenting is strong in Richmond. The lead member is an impressive champion for children. The corporate parenting panel focuses on priority areas that matter for children and young people, recently considering housing and accommodation. An effective Children in Care Council actively participates in the work of the panel, alongside their own active action plan and local offer to children.
31. Statutory functions for children and families in Richmond are delegated to Achieving for Children (AfC), a not-for-profit community interest company which is jointly owned by the local authority. There are clear lines of regular

accountability between the local authority and AfC, with helpful scrutiny and support.

32. Relationships with partner agencies are strong, and children and their families generally receive a good multi-agency response to their needs. This could be strengthened further by improving the quality of contacts to the SPA, and by increasing the range of partners who hold the lead professional role in early help support.
33. A stable and ambitious senior leadership team provides a clear vision and a dedicated focus on services for children. Leaders are responsive, flexible and supportive. They have a good understanding of services, with a particularly impressive array of quality assurance checks and balances. This includes seeking out external evaluation and scrutiny. Detailed work is undertaken to understand the experiences of children, including through seeking direct feedback from parents, carers and young people. Findings are regularly discussed with practitioners to support ongoing reflection and learning.
34. The workforce in Richmond is a strong, skilled and resilient group of dedicated practitioners. Staff enjoy working in Richmond, their morale is high and they appreciate the high level of support, the career progression opportunities, the learning and development offer and the ambition that the organisation has for them.
35. Practitioners prioritise the key issues for children to ensure they are protected and do well. The majority of staff have manageable caseloads. Some practitioners in the referral and assessment service and the safeguarding service are, on occasion, working at the higher end of a manageable caseload. While all staff report being content and well supported, heavy workloads have resulted in some recent drift for a small number of children. Leaders have brought in additional staffing capacity, which is rectifying this problem.
36. Operational managers are committed and supportive and staff appreciate the availability and support they provide. Regular supervision supports the progression of children's cases, but is not always reflected in their case notes. Management oversight is an embedded process; managers know what is happening for children and the detail of their lives. Pressure on managers means that, on occasion, recording of their oversight lacks detail.
37. Senior leaders in Richmond take continuous steps to recruit, retain and develop staff. They have developed a successful programme for newly qualified social workers and use creative methods, including bringing in external companies, to assist them. Some children have had changes of social worker, with some increase in staff turnover during the pandemic.
38. Senior leaders are aware of the particular pressures on the referral and assessment and safeguarding teams. They have supported practice with a set of solutions targeted to reduce these pressures. These have included additional business support to ensure the timeliness of core group and child protection conference minutes, an additional time-limited child in need team and additional posts in other key areas, including family support worker posts.

Senior leaders and managers know where they need to focus their efforts and they act to ensure that children and practitioners are well supported.

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